




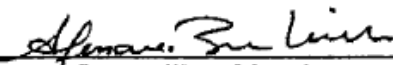
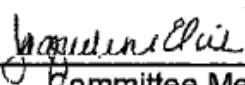
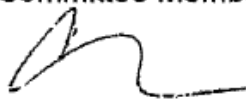
SEESAWING: AN EVALUATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS  
AND ATTAINMENTS OF COLLEGE-AGED BIWOC

A Thesis

Presented by

Sara Francis Gilkenson

Approved:

|   |                             |
|---|-----------------------------|
| <br>_____<br>Advisor and Committee Chair | 06/07/2023<br>_____<br>Date |
| <br>_____<br>Committee Member            | 06/08/2023<br>_____<br>Date |
| <br>_____<br>Committee Member           | 06/08/2023<br>_____<br>Date |
| _____<br>Committee Member   | _____<br>Date               |
| <br>_____<br>Department Chair          | 06/09/2023<br>_____<br>Date |
| <br>_____<br>Dean of School            | 06/14/23<br>_____<br>Date   |

SEESAWING: AN EVALUATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND  
ATTAINMENTS OF COLLEGE-AGED BIWOC

By Sara Francis Gilkenson

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Master of Justice Studies

In the Department of Sociology  
The Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Rhode Island College

2023

---

## **SEESAWING: AN EVALUATION OF THE EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND ATTAINMENTS OF COLLEGE-AGED BIWOC**

### **ABSTRACT**

Sara Francis Gilkenson

There are disparities in achievement for Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color (BIWOC) both during college as well as beyond completion due to insufficient preparation before matriculation. Researchers have attributed this struggle of aligning attainment and aspiration to financial constraints, culture shock, and overcoming an academic and social learning curve. However, many institutions have naively created programming and scholarship to aid these barriers, yet retention and graduation rates for BIWOC students are still lower than their white counterparts. These gaps that are characterized by race and ethnicity are persistent, leading institutions to wonder how effective their support systems are. This thesis study explores the voices of college-aged BIWOC. It aims to educate universities on dismantling their group stereotypes of BIWOC to adopt a more communal climate for students that treats BIWOC as individuals rather than homogeneously.

The goal of this study is to support BIWOC students by educating universities on the importance of intentional programming that includes being transparent about disparities and why the programming exists altogether. This thesis uses reflexivity and qualitative interviews with a sample of 15 BIWOC who had attended one or more college classes, who are currently between the ages of 18 to 35, and who have lived in Rhode Island at some point in their life to better understand the experience of BIWOC. Among the sample size, an eclectic mix of colleges were represented including community colleges, public universities, Historically Black Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Predominately White Institutions, and other private institutions. Zoom interviews were held from December 2022-February 2023. They were recorded, transcribed, and coded inductively and then the researcher analyzed the codes, noting seven overarching themes: Educational Seesawing, Ignorance Fatigue, Heightened Awareness of Disparities, Drive/Focus/Disposition, Family Influence, Literacy, and Self-Limitation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation to my thesis advisor Dr. Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur. This paper and the research behind it would not have been possible without her exceptional guidance, support, and dedication. Her charisma, expertise, and honest feedback have been an inspiration to me and kept my work on track from start to finish.

I would also like to thank the staff on my thesis committee. Dr. Alessandra Bazo Vienrich was always available to meet with me to offer critical feedback. Her assistance was vital in the completion of my work.

Additionally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Jacqueline Elcik. Dr. Elcik agreed to sit on my thesis committee though employed by a different institution. Her desire to work with me and provide candid literature recommendations was imperative for my academic success. I cannot speak highly enough of her contributions. Special thanks to Providence College for allowing her to participate.

I would also like to thank all interviewees. My research could not exist without you all sharing your experiences, your stories, and your truth. Thank you all for being reflective, honest, and genuine.

I wish to thank my family and friends for their support and encouragement throughout my study.

And lastly, I would like to thank my cohort. Kaila Carroll, Melinda Groff, and Lindsay Petit, I am forever indebted to you all. Thank you for allowing me to bounce ideas off you all. Thank you for helping me stay focused. Thank you for becoming my family. I have so much love, appreciation, and respect for our cohort, and I would not have been able to finish this thesis without the help of each of you.

## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION.....                                  | 1  |
| LITERATURE REVIEW.....                             | 5  |
| <i>Cultural and Social Capital Theory</i> .....    | 15 |
| STUDY RATIONALE.....                               | 16 |
| METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH.....                       | 17 |
| FINDINGS.....                                      | 24 |
| <i>Educational Seesawing</i> .....                 | 25 |
| <i>Heightened Awareness of Disparities</i> .....   | 31 |
| <i>Ignorance Fatigue</i> .....                     | 34 |
| <i>Drive/Focus/ Disposition</i> .....              | 40 |
| <i>The Flip Side of DFD: Self-limitation</i> ..... | 42 |
| <i>Family Influence</i> .....                      | 49 |
| <i>Literacy: Financial and Education</i> .....     | 52 |
| <i>Limitations</i> .....                           | 60 |
| <i>Policy Implications</i> .....                   | 60 |
| <i>Safe Spaces for Dialogue</i> .....              | 61 |
| <i>Free Trials</i> .....                           | 63 |
| <i>Community partnerships</i> .....                | 64 |
| <i>Future research</i> .....                       | 66 |
| REFERENCES.....                                    | 69 |
| APPENDICES.....                                    | 73 |
| <i>Appendix A: Recruitment Email</i> .....         | 73 |
| <i>Appendix B- Flyer</i> .....                     | 74 |
| <i>Appendix C- Qualifying Survey</i> .....         | 75 |
| <i>Appendix D- Interview Questions</i> .....       | 81 |
| <i>Appendix E- IRB Approval</i> .....              | 83 |
| <i>Appendix F Consent Form</i> .....               | 84 |

## INTRODUCTION

As the Diversity Coordinator for the Supreme Court of Rhode Island and as a former Academic Advisor in both the high school environment, and higher education realm, I have personally witnessed disparities in achieving aspirations for BIWOC (Black, Indigenous, and women of color)<sup>1</sup> both during college as well as beyond completion due to insufficient preparation before matriculation. Although institutions have declared a newfound dedication to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in recent years, these efforts have not effectively addressed why there is a need for additional multicultural support in the first place. Therefore, many BIWOCs enter college thinking that they are as adequately prepared as other students, leaving them completely bewildered when assimilating to the academic and social scene. In turn, many BIWOC students have trouble processing why their assimilation to college was not as seamless as they would have anticipated.

Institutions across the country emphasize communal spaces built specifically for underrepresented students. However, understanding the rationale for separate spaces on college campuses for multicultural students can be a hard concept to grasp considering that segregation has been illegal at the state level since the enactment of

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper utilizes BIWOC rather than *Women of Color (WOC)* because according to an article on NPR, utilizing the term *people of color (POC)* / women of color evades the experiences that disproportionately affect Black and Indigenous people specifically. These experiences include, but are not limited to mass incarceration, police violence, inability to access good health care, and access to education. Because this research includes first-person accounts of multiple women that identify as Black, BIWOC is used to validate their unique hurdles, in contrast to other women of color who are not African American or Black (Meraji et al. 2020).

the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Civil Rights 1964). Furthermore, doubly disadvantaged students (meaning they have experienced both financial and educational disadvantage) often equate forming relationships with professors and other support systems as sucking up (Jack 2019: 107). Thus, BIWOC may avoid places like the multi-cultural center and other supports in fear that their success will be seen as less valiant and of less merit if they receive assistance while matriculating academically and socially.

This is a hindrance for many BIWOC as they struggle with culture shock while trying to navigate a learning curve, making it challenging for them to keep up with the rigor that universities demand. Additionally, it has negative repercussions for both university administration and students as faculty soon tokenize the outspoken students of color who are oftentimes *privileged poor*<sup>2</sup> unintentionally, causing them to question why all BIPOC students do not present themselves in the same fashion. This homogenous viewpoint regarding these students is often ignorant and can cause a hostile environment for BIWOC, with BIWOC feeling marginalized by the university and the university administration questioning the academic ability of these students.

Although many institutions do make a noble effort to create helpful programming for BIWOC and do not actively choose to tokenize the BIWOC who participate, some of the problem lies within the perception of the programming from the lens of BIWOC students themselves. Some participants in this study indicated that the programming was performative and therefore did not want to attend. Additionally, other participants felt that the programming was not always applicable to them.

---

<sup>2</sup> Privileged poor are defined as poor kids that went to private high schools or elite public schools that were well-resourced and primarily attended by students from well-off families (Jack 2020).



Attendance at these programs is often BIWOC students who are already familiar with why the programming exists in the first place. Those students are the ones who understand educational disparities due to experiences before college matriculation that have shaped them to take advantage of all resources offered. As this paper shows, many of these students are *privileged poor*, affluent, or students who had traveled between different school systems, during high school, causing them to be keenly aware of differences in learning environments or academically prepared.

These students understand that education “effectively promotes social mobility and equality” (Xu, 2018:54) but also understand that education extends beyond the classroom. These students can figure out that to be a successful BIWOC is like an equation that includes passing classes, forming connections, and taking advantage of opportunities. On the contrary, the students who do not currently understand this equation can hyper-fixate on either trying to fit in or their academics. They miss the importance of both fitting in and doing well academically because they do not understand the *hidden curriculum*<sup>3</sup> for having the most successful college experience. This was because, through no fault of their own, they were naïve to the disparities that exist in the education system before attending college.

Although researchers attempt to explain these disparities and the reasons why said disparities continue beyond high school, the research undermines and oversimplifies the experiences of all BIPOC without drawing distinctions between different demographics. Literature fails to adequately address the different lived experiences of college-aged

---

<sup>3</sup> The Hidden Curriculum refers to the unwritten and unspoken knowledge and skills a student needs to be successful in college (Calarco 2020).

Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color (BIWOC) by grouping their hurdles with Black, Indigenous, and Men of Color (BIMOC) or with Caucasian women. The literature invalidates the unique struggles that BIWOC encounter in achieving educational aspirations. It also has a homogenous viewpoint of the BIWOC experience on campus altogether. Sam, a teacher in Providence Rhode Island echoed this feeling of a disconnect between awareness of educational disparities when reminiscing on her high school experience. She stated,

In my time after college [I was working for] Teach for America. It's...largely staffed by white women who are coming into title 1 urban schools, trying to, you know, make the education system more equitable. But they're just like middle-class white girls from Connecticut who don't have experience with urban populations with disenfranchised youth, with you know at-risk people, so there's like this culture shock that comes with transitioning to working in these environments because they don't have the racial pretense, they don't have the understanding of what it's like or the perspective of what it's like to be these people. They're not as able to help as people from the community are... I think there probably should be exposure programs for all people. And really, I think that's where DEI work comes in in well-funded public schools.

You know, I have to give my high school credit. They...knew that the demographic of our school was very white. They knew that we were going to go out into a multi-racial world, and they gave us the opportunity to engage on many different levels with people from all walks of life. People of all races, of all backgrounds. We volunteered in soup kitchens. We collaborated with different groups like nursing homes and [other organizations] to do outreach. I mean, we really, we really connected with all ends of our community. And I think that really helped a lot of people, because I remember thinking how ignorant my college friends were for not having this same perspective, and I remember thinking that that was unforgivable because they were educated.

But I think education fails in specifically private white institutions, right in addressing how we exist in a world where inequities exist. And how do we like have interpersonal relationships where the power dynamics are different? I...think there does need to be programming for that. I don't know what that looks like, but I think it needs to exist because it would

bridge some of the gaps between...I'm thinking specifically of like young female white teachers and young Black<sup>4</sup> students.

Therefore, this study includes aims to understand the threads that bind together the educational aspirations and attainment of women of color through scholarly literature and first-person narratives. It examines the relationships between Intersectionality, Black Respectability Politics, Collective Identity, The Burden of Acting White, Swirl, and Self-handicapping. It is focused primarily on College-Aged Women of Color.

This study is crucial in understanding the fundamental problems responsible for racial and ethnic disparities for BIPOC, but more specifically BIWOC, and aims to help researchers think innovatively about policy reform. Thus, the primary goal of this research is to:

1. Gather information about the sense of belonging and Black Respectability Politics from the lens of women of color;
2. Understand barriers to higher educational attainment for women of color;
3. Analyze if and why women of color in higher education are often subject to an environment in which they feel isolated, unsupported, and inadequate to the degree that they self-handicap their capabilities;
4. Provide recommendations to institutions as they look to increase enrollment, retention, and graduation rates among women of color.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This work uses reflexivity<sup>5</sup>, first-person narratives, and literature to examine the unique perspective that intersectionality plays in the college experiences of BIWOC. In

---

<sup>4</sup>Perlman (2015) notes that some scholars capitalize “Black” to emphasize the importance in the message, especially by lowercasing the counterpart. This literature review illustrates the oppression and burden that Blacks have felt historically, and therefore capitalized “Black” as a sign of solidarity and respect.

<sup>5</sup> Bazo Vienrich (2021) states that when a researcher identifies with their sample, reflexivity can be used to intersect the researcher's positionality with their methodology.

1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality.” Intersectionality illustrates the overlap of different systems of oppression that make a distinct experience for people with multiple identity categories (Crenshaw 2018). Both women and BIPOC are minoritized groups, meaning that there is a distinctive burden that someone who is both a woman and a person of color may face. Women of color encounter struggles that are exclusive to them and these struggles govern their abilities, their actions, and their sense of belonging in everyday life. One phenomenon that affects women of color in urban communities is *the Code of the Street*. Anderson (1999) illustrates this as an ideology of adhering to a set of unspoken rules that are socially acceptable. He asserts that in diverse cities civilians are governed by either a “code of civility [in suburban areas and/ or] a code of conduct regulated by the threat of violence” (15-16). This code dictates how people interact with each other, and their professional and financial decisions, and it directly influences their social ties. Thus, it is imperative to understand if, how, and why women of color prioritize the code of conduct of their community over the code of conduct set by government officials and other institutions alike.

One core component of the *Code of the Street* is oppositional Culture (OC), which is a term coined in 1978 by John Ogbu (2004). Ogbu claimed that Black students specifically will intentionally sabotage their academic performance in fear of being perceived as white, due to their internalized obligation to their collective racial identity. While many scholars have criticized the validity of this belief by arguing that Black students have a higher level of respect for their high-achieving peers than white students do (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Berzin 2010; Blake 2018; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). Some students asserted that this applied to them in their

formative years. Yes, Black students can do poorly because they often lack access to the material conditions that “foster the development of skills, habits, and styles rewarded by teachers” (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998:555). However, this is not the only factor that affects success. Some BIWOC can do poorly because society makes them feel like that is all they are capable of being.

Whaley and Noël (2011) for example, say that when race is at the forefront of what students see when looking at situations that include high academic achievement, students can fixate on a belief that their performance will solidify any preconceived negative group stereotypes influenced by European American culture. Similarly, to OC, stereotype threat predicts “academic disidentification as a way of coping with the social, psychological, and cultural barriers related to schooling and education among African American Youth” (Brown and Jones 2004; Osborne 1999; and Whaley and Noël 2011:154). This reaffirms the theory that all BIPOC students do not have to feel suffocated by OC to later experience imposter phenomenon (IP).

The mere reality that BIPOC feel collectively responsible to uphold what is racially acceptable can cause them to feel inadequate and potentially limit their aspirations regardless of their ability. Shavers and Moore (2019:219), point out that BIWOC women, with a specific focus on Black women, can feel like a “perpetual outsider” because they have a “heightened awareness and sensitivity of their minority status,” further perpetuating IP. Oftentimes, Black women professionals with solo

status<sup>6</sup> can feel an internal struggle when navigating PWIs because of their low self-construal levels.

BIWOC, specifically Black women, have a self-perception that is rooted in *tokenism*. Black women “feel highly visible because they stand out but feel invisible because they are not valued for who they are as a person but rather are seen as a token” (Shavers and Moore, 2019:219). Additionally, they feel both burdened and obligated to mentor other students or professionals of color. This burden can impact their success as their attention becomes divided between their responsibilities and helping others achieve their responsibilities as well.

Similarly, to OC and stereotype threat, Imposter Syndrome or Imposter Phenomenon (IP) (Clance and Imes 1978) is a concept that explains a deeply rooted feeling of inadequacy and outsidership despite academic and/ or professional achievement. IP was initially studied in white adult women due to an embedded sense of collective identity that resides within gender norms (Bernard, Hoggard, and Neblett 2018). Unlike OC, IP has historically been accepted among most scholars with little to no opposition until recently. Researchers have adapted the initial focus group of IP and applied it to men as well as other demographics. Levesque (2018) and Sonnak and Towell (2001) have even shown that the roots of IP can reside in adolescents, contrary to the initial findings when it was first conceptualized.

---

<sup>6</sup> Sekaquaptewa *et al.* (2007) note that when minorities are underrepresented, they experience solo-status, which is defined as being the only person representative of their shared community. Frequently Black women in Doctoral programs are the only Black women in the program. This affects how they construe themselves and coincides with their self-appointed accountability to other Black women, causing a collectivist and interdependent sense of self. This sense of self can cause them to feel tokenized as they feel like a representative for all Black women.

However, women of color, specifically Black women of color have begun pushing back at imposter syndrome stating that though it is a valid sentiment it is often misdiagnosed. Jamison (2023) states that BIWOC do not necessarily feel that they are imposters, but rather are realizing that they are “enveloped in a system that fails to support them” (1). Furthermore, imposter syndrome implies that women have low self-confidence rather than recognize the systemic hurdles that face professional women. IP inaccurately reframes institutional inequality as an individual pathology and emphasizes fixing women rather than deconstructing and restructuring the environments they are in (Landry 2023 and Burey and Tulshyan 2021). Thus, it is essential to understand that BIWOC experience feelings of inadequacy in institutions not because they are insecure, but because the environment itself is not designed to best support them collectively.

Collective identity is a term that refers to people’s sense of self. It encompasses their feeling of belonging and stems from a person’s collective experience or series of collective experiences (Ogbu, 2004:3). According to Ogbu (2004), the oppositional collective identity for Black people started before emancipation and is still prevalent today. Fundamentally, Black Americans were dehumanized and deprived of all human rights.<sup>7</sup> They were not allowed to “act white” and were punished for doing so. This detoured them from learning to read and write as they had to uphold the persona that their masters expected of them to avoid any repercussions (Ogbu, 2004). Contrary to the “social expectations” during this period, African Americans acted differently when

---

<sup>7</sup> According to Ogbu (2004) Black Americans were victims of involuntary incorporation into society, meaning that they did not choose to be minorities but were forced through conquest, colonization, or enslavement. The history and ramifications of involuntary incorporation specifically affect U.S born Black African Americans today.

they were with other African Americans than when they were with white people, creating a dual heritage.

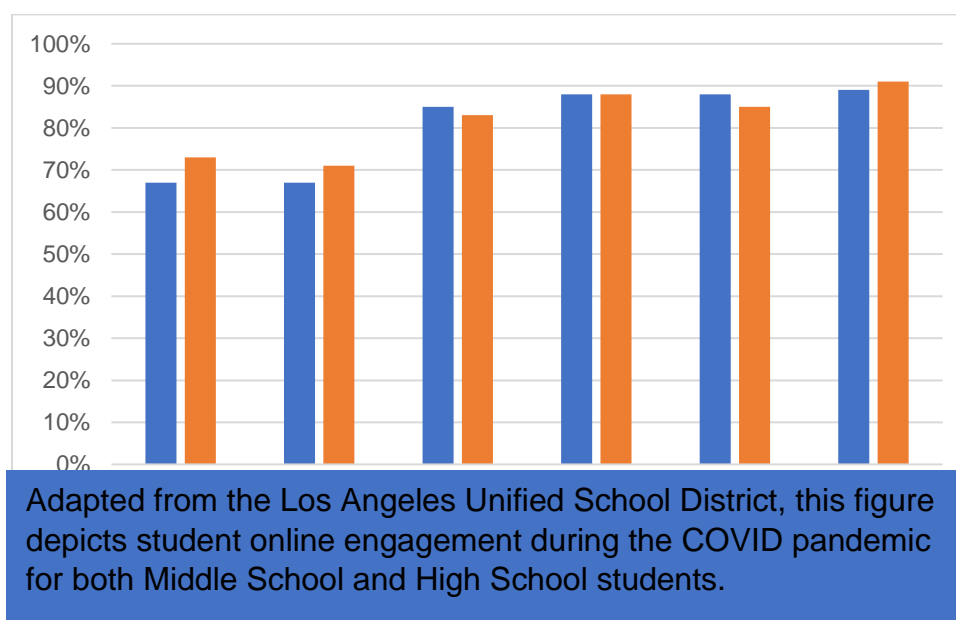
Du Bois (1897) defined this as a *double-consciousness*, or as Kendall (2012) described it, the conflict in identity that resides in being both Black [or a minority] and American. This sheds light on why OC is a problem today. There is no space for students to carry themselves in ways that are accepted in both white communities and Black/ Brown communities. Thus, young students feel pressured to decide to either assimilate by adopting the stereotypical white attitudes and dialects to meet the expectations of the predominantly white administrators or to reject these attitudes and dialects altogether (Ogbu, 2004). Both of these decisions come with pros and cons and can ultimately be a catalyst for experiencing IP in the future. This is crucial to note because due to the collective identity mentality, when a Black individual is the only member of their race in the academic community (i.e. in a predominately white institution), they can feel as though they are a representative of the entire BIPOC community and must act accordingly (Sekaquaptewa, Waldman, and Thompson, 2007).

Before the average BIPOC student turns 18 they are substantially behind academically compared to their white counterparts, four years behind in fact (Harris, 2006). Additionally in figure 1, the Los Angeles Unified School District, reported that due to the COVID pandemic, BIPOC students were less active in online classes because of a lack of stable WIFI, and computer access which furthered the divide (COVID-19 2020). This means that before Black students are adults, they already feel like they will have to play a never-ending game of catchup to be as successful as the white students. With that runs the risk of being perceived as white-washed by their



communities. Consequently, when students of color share the same success or more success than their white peers, their hard-earned merit may feel inauthentic, especially if they attribute their successes to a white mentor who only invested in them because of an inherent savior complex (Kabalkin, 2021).

*Figure 1 Online Student Engagement by Race During the COVID pandemic in Los Angeles (Los Angeles Unified School Department 2020).*



This mentality can also be prevalent in BIWOC professionals as they may only feel seen, valued, and looked upon for guidance because they are fulfilling the “diversity perspective” or political agenda for the school or job (Martinez-Cola, 2020). Although the scope of literature is limited, the feelings of tokenism are embedded deeply among the BIPOC community and OC and/ or residual trauma are the result. In one research study, it was noted that adults realized that:

It is not cool for minority students to be smart and [BIPOC] students are ‘embarrassed’ about their ability. [Additionally,] others maintained that [BIPOC] students ‘don’t place a high value on education and that males, especially, are ‘averse to success’ because it constitutes ‘betraying the brothers’ (Tyson, Darity and Castellino, 2005:594).

Many scholars in the literature have discredited this attitude because they fail to consider Du Bois's (1897) observation that many BIPOC students, particularly Black students are forced to live a dual life (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Berzin 2010; Blake 2018; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005). Many such students are masters of the code switch and, due to the trauma embedded within their collective identity, will analyze the room before deciding which “cultural hat” to put on in that particular environment.<sup>8</sup>

This is because in their communities they are expected to follow the *code of the street* as means of survival. However, those same principles of the code are sometimes seen as socially inappropriate to use outside of those communities. Unfortunately, because BIPOC college students are often subject to a predominately white environment, they feel compelled to use Black Respectability Politics to appease their white authority figures. Thus, when conducting research, it is not guaranteed that students will be honest about their effort when they know they are under a microscope.

### *The Privileged Poor*

As a multiracial woman that identifies with the same group of people that I studied, I explore my personal experience as a BIWOC researcher of BIWOC participants. Though my identity allowed me to be included in this research, my perspective was vastly different than the majority of other participants. Though many people of color live in communities where upholding the *code of the street* is vital, there are students from these communities that have the opportunity to attend school systems

---

<sup>8</sup> McCluney et al(2015:1) define code-switching as “adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities.”

outside of the community. Anthony Abraham Jack refers to these students as “the privileged poor,” which he defines as poor kids that went to private high schools or elite public schools that were well-resourced and primarily attended by students from well-off families (Jack 2020). Only two out of 16 participants including myself attended well-resourced schools for all of their academic experience before college. This provided me with a narrow scope of the realities and educational disparities that other participants faced before entering college.

Jack (2020) explained that privileged poor students tend to do well academically in college and have an easier time assimilating than other students of color because they have acquired the necessary skills to be successful before college. For example, Jack (2020) references that a student that was privileged poor felt more comfortable talking with faculty which ultimately led to academic success. However, the student might have developed fierce independence as a repercussion of feeling alienated from her peers which allowed her to focus on connecting with professors and utilizing resources that would make her successful. This was apparent in my lived experience and was not something that other BIWOC have had the opportunity to live before college. As a result, those that did have the opportunity to be privileged poor, even if only for a short period, were aware of a certain social and cultural way to communicate in predominately white spaces.

One strategy that BIWOC, including myself have adapted to help them become successful is *Respectability Politics*. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined the term “politics of respectability” which she exemplified with Black, middle-class, Baptist women (Higginbotham 1993, Obasogie and Newman

2016). She explained that these women utilized respectability politics to reduce negative stereotypes about Black women that White Americans held. In doing so Black women will adopt certain attitudes and behaviors to essentially behave more like white people. The idea was that this would evoke an increase in equal treatment. Higginbotham (1993) argued that Black leaders equated proper and respectable behavior with access to equal civil and political rights.

On the other hand, those who did not comply were deemed the cause of racial injustice. While many women of color may align the code of the street with their academic endeavors and/ or priorities, others are more concerned with utilizing *Black Respectability Politics*. Osagie and Newman (2016) describe this phenomenon as minorities choosing to behave respectably to elicit the esteem of white people while simultaneously uplifting the reputation of a minority group. This is similar to Goffman's theory of dramaturgy and symbolic interactionism. Goffman explained that theater can be used as a metaphor to explain human behavior. Furthermore, he stated that individuals will try and influence other people's opinions of them through impression management, which is when someone tries to present themselves most favorably (Manning 2020).

Black Respectability Politics is a way that BIWOC utilizes Goffman's theory of dramaturgy. While this can be a tactful strategy for a woman of color to use in environments that may help them achieve their educational aspirations, it redirects the blame of institutional racism and inequalities to the behaviors and attitudes of the victims. Women who are Privileged Poor are exposed to this cultural strategy earlier on,

as they are in communities that are predominately white in their formative years in contrast to other women that are in predominately Black/ Brown spaces.

Another barrier that women of color can face is educational *swirling*. Swirling can be defined as a fluctuation in institutional enrollment that interrupts a linear educational trajectory (de los Santos & Wright 1990). Furthermore, students from lower income brackets are more likely to swirl between different institutions during their postsecondary pathway due to family-inflicted obligations or personal and financial matters. Because there are both race gaps and gender gaps that contribute to income inequality, it is no surprise that women of color are disproportionately affected by swirl. Swirl causes interruptions in education that affect completion time and completion rate (Furbeck et al. 2015). However, acquiring cultural and social capital can help minimize the negative implications of swirl.

### *Cultural and Social Capital Theory*

Cultural Capital is defined as the accrual of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that demonstrate cultural competence and status (Bourdieu 1973). Though it is harder for more women of color to acquire cultural capital due to a lack of resources that other demographics may have access to, it can be achieved over time in the right environment. However, not everyone is equally valued in every environment. Social Capital, similarly, is essentially the culmination of actual or potential social resources such as a strong social network. In short, cultural capital is what someone knows and social capital is who you know. BIWOC historically have less access to connections that will benefit them, however like Cultural Capital, it can be acquired.

## STUDY RATIONALE

Overall, the literature asserts that women of color can struggle with identity in many ways when assimilating to new environments. Whether they adhere to respectability politics or the code of the street or struggle with oppositional culture or imposter syndrome, they are often subject to an environment that does not allow them to be their authentic selves. Furthermore, financial hurdles, educational swirl, and the amount of cultural or social capital that a woman of color has accumulated before enrollment, on top of said identity ramifications, can be detrimental when aligning educational aspirations with educational attainment.

BIWOC students often feel isolated, unsupported, and inadequate, which can cause them to limit their potential and progress (Shavers and Moore, 2019). At the same time, institutions are continuing to fail at structuring themselves to allow their minority students the material conditions and psychological support necessary for success (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998). In turn, students do not feel like they have adequate means or preparation to thrive even if they have the desire to.

Hence, this research is an empirical assessment of educational, social, and mental experiences in the collegiate environment among women of color. A lot of the research attributes the educational failures of BIWOC students to a lack of financial support or guidance. There is a gap in the literature that is centered around women of color who limit their attempts to achieve their aspirations due to the fear of failing. Therefore, this research seeks to understand the experiences of BIWOC college students as they work to achieve their educational goals after enrollment. It sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the experiences of BIWOC, before enrollment, affect their ability to attain their educational aspirations?
  - a. Do BIWOC have a collectivist conception of identity?
  - b. Are BIWOC utilizing campus resources to aid with assimilation?

Answering the questions can help policymakers and institutions create solutions that will help deconstruct systematic oppression and institutionalized racism to better serve BIWOC.

#### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

As alluded to previously, from looking at my experiences and with the experience of BIWOC, there are unique struggles that we encounter in achieving educational aspirations. While many institutions have made strides to lessen the financial constraints women of color may face, this study seeks to understand what other barriers to completion women of color encounter beyond financial hurdles. Thus, this study focuses on women of color who had attended at least one college course. Through an analysis of the student experiences of BIWOC, this paper provides evidence-based recommendations to drive instrumental change for underrepresented students to help align aspirations and attainment.

Qualitative interviews were conducted between November 2022 and March 2023, with a sample size of 15 women of color between 18 and 35 years old. One additional participant was autoethnographic in nature. All participants were given the option to complete their interview in person or via zoom. 100% of participants chose to interview

via zoom. Each participant has lived in Rhode Island or attended at least one college course in Rhode Island or Massachusetts<sup>9</sup>.

Participants represented a wide array of schools representing more than half of the 13 accredited institutions in Rhode Island as well as other institutions outside of the local community (*see figures 2 and 3*). Among these institutions were two-year and four-year institutions, private and public institutions, Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs), and one Hispanic Serving Institution.

The study was advertised to all colleges and universities in Rhode Island via email to different departments and or professors at the institutions as well as in common community spaces and on social media, to reduce selection bias (*see Appendix A and B*). All methods of advertisement contained a link to an interest and eligibility survey to be completed before scheduling the interviews.

The eligibility survey was administered on Qualtrics (*see Appendix C*) and verified that each participant identified as a woman of color between the ages of 18 and 35. It also confirmed that the participant had taken at least one college course in Rhode Island or Massachusetts; or that they had resided in Rhode Island at a point in time. The survey also collected a self-selected pseudonym of each participant and other demographic information such as ethnicity and sexual orientation. Once candidates were confirmed eligible for the study, they were contacted for an interview via email (*see Appendix D for the interview guide*).

---

<sup>9</sup> Please note that the location was narrowed to Rhode Island or Massachusetts to capture the local community of the primary researcher.



Overall, 38 participants started the survey form, and of that number, 74% were deemed eligible. Although all 26 of these participants were contacted for an interview, 16 chose to participate in interviews<sup>10</sup>. When looking at the sample, 11 out of 16 participants (including the researcher) identified as heterosexual, eight out of 16 (50%) were Black or African American, five out of 16 (31%) were Hispanic/ Latino, one out of 16 (6.25%) was American Indian or Alaska Native, and two out of 16 (12.5%) were multiracial.

Additionally, 63% had lived in multiple states or countries, and 5 out of 16 (31%) have attended both an HBCU and a Predominately White Institution. 3 out of 16 participants (18.75%) of participants had an interruption in their schooling that caused them to step away, with 2 out of 3 of those participants transferring to a different college later on (see Figure 3). All participants had taken at least one college course; institutions attended by participants are listed in Figure #2:

*Figure 2 College Representation Among Participants*

| Rhode Island College/ University  | Other College/ University   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bryant University</li> <li>• College Unbound</li> <li>• Community College of Rhode Island</li> <li>• Johnson and Wales University</li> <li>• Providence College</li> <li>• Rhode Island College</li> <li>• Salve Regina</li> <li>• University of Rhode Island</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Springfield College</li> <li>• Claflin University</li> <li>• Vanderbilt</li> <li>• Landmark College</li> <li>• Universidad Pablo Olavide (Semester Abroad)</li> <li>• Marymount</li> <li>• Jacksonville State</li> <li>• Stetson University</li> <li>• Idaho State University</li> </ul> |
| <p>This figure depicts all colleges and universities attended by participants for undergraduate and post graduate programs.</p>   |   |

<sup>10</sup> Please note that although there were 15 participants interviewed, the researcher's individual experience was also evaluated during the analysis of the data.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews ranging from 40 minutes to 80 minutes in length allowed the participants to share their personal stories. This method provided an opportunity to understand the unique experiences that the participants faced before college, during college, and beyond when applicable. They also provided more depth and detail than other research methods. The interviews gathered information surrounding educational background, family life, assimilation to college, educational aspirations, support systems, hardships and successes during college, and overall attitude towards college.

Each interview was recorded and automatically transcribed utilizing Zoom, then corrected by hand before the researcher conducted line-by-line inductive coding and thematic analysis using Dedoose. Inductive coding allowed the researcher to identify over 100 codes to characterize different trends that emerged from the interviews. These codes were then used to generate seven broader themes and analyzed for additional commonalities.

Figure 3 Participant Information

| Sexual Orientation | Race                      | Ethnicity          | Level of Education             | Matriculation Year | States/ Countries Lived In | Location of College | Colleges Attended                               | Graduation Year  | College Exit |
|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|---|------------------|--------------|
| Straight           | Black or African American | Dominican Republic | Some College                   | 2022               | RI                         | RI                  | Providence College                              | 2026             |              |
| Straight           | Black or African American | N/A                | Graduate Degree                | 2014               | NJ/ RI/ SC                 | SC                  | Clafin University and Vanderbilt                | 2018 and 2021    |              |
| Bisexual           | Multi-racial              | Unknown            | Some College                   | 2017               | RI                         | RI                  | Community College of RI (CCRI)/ College Unbound | 2026             | 2018         |
| Bisexual           | Multi-racial              | Hispanic/ Latino   | Some College                   | 2015               | RI                         | RI                  | CCRI  | Did Not Complete | 2018         |
| Bisexual           | Multi-racial              |                    | Graduate Degree                | 2014               | RI/ MA/ Spain              | RI                  | Bryant University/ Landmark College/ RIC        | 2018, 2023       |              |
| Straight           | Black or African American |                    | 4-year college (BA/ BS degree) | 2014               | RI/ MA                     | RI                  | Bryant University                               | 2018             |              |

|          |                                  |                    |                                |      |                       |                                |   |               |  |
|----------|----------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|---|---------------|--|
| Straight | Black or African American        | Cape Verdean       | 4-year college (BA/ BS degree) | 2015 | DC/VA                 | VA/DC/ RI                      | University of Rhode Island & Marymount university   | 2019          |  |
| Straight | Black or African American        | N/A                | Graduate Degree                | 2015 | MA/ RI                | MA                             | Springfield College                                 | 2019, 2022    |  |
| Straight | Black or African American        | Dominican Republic | Graduate Degree                | 2008 | RI                    | RI and MA                      | CCRI, Rhode Island College, Northeastern University | 2018          |  |
| Straight | Multi-racial                     | Colombian          | 4-year college (BA/ BS degree) | 2015 | RI/ Columbia          | RI                             | Bryant University                                   | 2019          |  |
| Straight | Black or African American        | N/A                | Graduate Degree                | 2007 | Georgia and Louisiana | Mississippi Rhode Island Idaho | Jacksonville State                                  | 2011 and 2012 |  |
| Lesbian  | American Indian or Alaska Native | N/A                | Some College                   | 2022 | RI                    | Rhode Island                   | College Unbound                                     | 2026          |  |
| Straight | Black or African American        | N/A                | 4-year college (BA/ BS degree) | 2014 | Georgia/ RI           | RI                             | Bryant University/ RIC                              | 2018          |  |

|          |              |                 |                                |      |  |                          |                                 |      |      |
|----------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|------|--|--------------------------|---------------------------------|------|------|
| Straight | Multi-racial | Hispanic/Latino | 2-year college (Assoc. Degree) | 2017 | RI and MA both for an even number of years | RI                       | Johnson and Wales University    | 2023 | 2020 |
| Lesbian  | Multi-racial | Romani (Gypsy)  | Graduate Degree                | 2014 | MA/ RI                                     | Florida and Rhode Island | Stetson University              | 2018 |      |
| Straight | Multi-racial | N/A             | 4-year college (BA/ BS degree) | 2015 | New York/ RI                               | New York/ RI             | Bryant University/ Trade School | 2019 |      |

Figure depicts participant demographic and educational information as collected on the eligibility survey.

## *Privacy*

This study utilized strong security measures. All data corresponded to a unique pseudonym selected by the participant and only accessible by the research team. Thus, participants were anonymous. Participants also gave their written consent at the initiation of the eligibility survey. If they did not consent or if their response to a question deemed them ineligible, the survey immediately terminated their participation.

Eligible participants signed a written consent form (*see Appendix F*) that outlined:

- 1) the protection of data
- 2) details about the study, and
- 3) provided helpful resources.

All data were transcribed and stored on a password-protected computer. All consent forms were submitted digitally. The data recordings and the digitized consent forms will be destroyed after three years.

## FINDINGS

After analyzing the narratives and literature and utilizing reflexivity, seven prevalent themes emerged from the interviews. Each of these themes encompassed the experiences and the sentiments shared by all participants and can be used to understand the unique trials and successes that BIWOC encountered during their time at college. The themes were:

- 1) Educational Seesawing
- 2) Ignorance Fatigue
- 3) Heightened Awareness of Disparities
- 4) Drive/Focus/Disposition
- 5) Family Influence
- 6) Literacy
- 7) Self-Limitation.

It is imperative to acknowledge that these themes intersect, as each participant shares experiences that traverse across a multitude of areas. These participant stories encapsulate the unique struggle, success, and identity of women of color. While each narrative cannot speak to the experience of all women of color, each testimonial overall embodies the adversity, resiliency, and triumph that women of color in the college realm are subject to every day.

### *Educational Seesawing*

The first theme that was identified was *educational seesawing*. I define educational seesawing as an individual bouncing back and forth between schools in different states or between school types<sup>11</sup>. 8 out of 16 (50%) of participants

---

<sup>11</sup>Contrary to swirl, educational seesawing is when an individual experiences distinctly different school systems prior to college or during college.

Example 1: An individual attends 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade in Rhode Island then they move to Atlanta and attend school there for one year, only to return to Rhode Island to attend their previous school.

Example 2: An individual goes to a predominantly white high school, then goes to an HBCU to obtain their bachelor's and then back to a PWI for a graduate level degree.

educationally seesawed either during their college experience or before college. Students who had experienced this seemed to have an easier time adapting to new environments and were more comfortable utilizing college support. Mimi recently began teaching at her alma mater, and shared the impact that educational seesawing between Louisiana and Georgia had on her academic and personal well-being:

“It was like [one high school] definitely prepare[d] me [for the other], and I’ll even say the same thing that I often say, it transpired to college... like my HBCU... it made me but my PWI... It polished me so... going to an HBCU for undergrad, and then, having the privilege to attend PWIs at the graduate level has made a huge impact on where I am today now because I know how to talk the language and say what I need to say, like in an email if that makes sense.... But I definitely change my language a little bit around different people.

Because Mimi had been in different educational environments before she understood that there are different social norms in different communities. This allowed her to excel academically. Had Mimi remained in one school for the duration of her primary years, her reality would have been different. Her experiences taught her that it was okay to embark on an educational journey that was the best fit for her. She even left her daughter behind with her father for three years while she went to pursue her Ph.D. because she knew it would be best in the long run.



Furthermore, Mimi shows that interviewees who were exposed to different educational systems tended to assimilate more easily to new situations, leading them to complete college. Many other participants who had educationally seesawed agreed that being in different environments allowed them to be more aware of behaviors and languages necessary for success. Ally echoed a similar sentiment when talking about her experience attending an HBCU before she went on to obtain her master's degree at a PWI:

“Anyone in my life... like a younger person in my life who is Black or person of color, I would encourage them to go to an HBCU. Because in the world that is like the world of America, you will have tons of time in your life to be around white people... So, if you can be in a space where it's like you are the majority, and you're around other people. It's a communal feeling that's like no other. So, I would encourage it...[ultimately] you can always learn to navigate white spaces.

As Ally shared, educational seesawing allowed her to see that being in predominately white spaces was vastly different than being in spaces that were predominantly of color. This knowledge allowed her to make educational choices that would benefit her personally. Ally's experience in different types of institutions with vastly different types of people, and community feel expressed gratitude that she carried with her throughout college. This helped her feel more engaged in the community and perform well during her college career. Another participant, Jane, shared her experience with educational seesawing before college.

“So, I actually I begged my parents after elementary school to switch schools because I went to a private elementary school... I just I felt like there wasn't as much like real world happening...because I played like rec basketball with public school kids, and I was like these kids are really real like they really know what's going on. I want to change that and surround myself with people that are connected to like the real world versus living in a bubble. [But the two schools were] definitely different.

I definitely saw kids that did not have stable households. Some kids were in foster homes. Some kids were like special education, and I definitely had my friends when I was first going into public school because I played that rec basketball, and I knew a lot of the sports girls. But public school... helped me develop some new friends outside of just sports which I think was really awesome. [Public school showed me that] not every household has a 2-parent income. Not every household has like stable parents. Some kids are really struggling, and like those kids can be great people and great friends. Like, I just think that [public school] showed how you see how an environment can affect people and I think that's what I noticed the most. I think those reasons are just due to like... Some people just can't control their situations, or where they come from. And with a private school. I think that you get a lot of kids that like have very controlled situations, you know, like there's not that much instability.

Jane like other participants, attributed much of her success, ability to set goals, and capability to prioritize, to being in an environment that showed different realities. This helped her succeed in college and land a good job upon graduating. Kayla, a Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for her alma mater, mentioned that she “just moved a lot” growing up as well. When asked to elaborate she said,

“I've been exposed to a lot of different educational settings, which I think is something that is unique to myself. When I was in, you know my primary school age I attended over 9 different schools in different states that were vastly different.”

She explained that experiencing different educational settings inspired her to work in her field. She expressed that each day she “tries to create different opportunities for students who look like [her], or who are just different than our societal norms, and create opportunities, pathways connecting them to resources.” This mentality is what separates the participants who successfully accomplished their aspirations from those who did not. Renee also experienced educational success which she attributed to some of her seesawing. She mentioned,

“I have 5 sisters and 2 brothers. I grew up with my mom which meant I grew up with one sister and one brother. Both of my parents were married until I was 9. Then they got divorced. So, I grew up with my brother and my sister, and then I mostly switched like a team, between both parents. So, it was just a lot of back and forth like my whole life. That's why I moved a lot between Rhode Island and Georgia.”

She explained that she attended public schools in Atlanta and both private and charter schools in Rhode Island. She realized that the school systems were vastly different. One primary memory she had was from when she moved back to Rhode Island for a third time when she was at the end of 10<sup>th</sup> grade. She explained that,

“You couldn't really get into any school like, cause you know, up north the high schools are like weird. Like you have to live in Providence. You have to like,

test and like, do all that stuff. But it was late in the year because I was already in high school. So my mom just knew somebody that worked at the school that I ended up going to. So that's why I ended up in that school.”

Renne’s experience of the power of networking opening opportunities transpired into how she approached college. This allowed her to choose a college that fit her well which resulted in a great job as an accountant upon graduation.

Related to educational seesawing is swirling. Three participants experienced this during their undergraduate journey and all three of them had an educational journey that contained interruptions, struggle, and delayed success. Lo, a participant from Providence, Rhode Island that had a stable education before college at urban schools, said “oh, man. My journey is...something else. I went to Rhode Island College. Then I went to Community College, then back to RIC, and then I actually finished up at Northeastern. That’s my journey for my undergrad.”

This experience caused her to have an undergraduate journey that took a few years longer than the average student. She mentioned that she did not realize that her high school education did not prepare her as well as it could have until she got to college. She was unfamiliar that any disparities existed and therefore was hesitant to ask for support. This affected her educational success and ability to assimilate.

Educational Seesawing diminishes extreme compliance with social norms for women of color. Because many participants had experienced several different

communities, they did not have a collectivist conception of identity either. This allowed them to understand that they did not have to act a certain way or limit their ambition to uphold some sort of social code. However, they did use Black Respectability Politics as a tool to acquire their aspirations. Nonetheless, these women were aware that the education standard is not universal and quickly learned that to have a successful life, they would need to take advantage of any resource that they could.

### *Heightened Awareness of Disparities*

Another prevalent theme that emerged as a direct result of educational seesawing was participants having a heightened awareness of disparities. 8/16 participants had a heightened awareness of disparities before their first college class. All 8 of these participants had educationally seesawed which exposed them to these disparities. When women of color experienced different school systems before entering college or when obtaining different degrees, they inevitably had a heightened awareness of disparities. This caused them to be more likely to code-switch and know that they must operate differently to get ahead. They utilized their awareness to be tactful and strategic.

Renee commented on her exposure to educational disparities, particularly that during high school she did not have an advisor:

“When I was getting ready for college one of the teachers or somebody helped me. Because I just had like a different situation from moving... and when I came to that school, I was kind of ahead of other

students, because, like at the public school I went to... it was a charter school in high school. So, like I was taking AP classes and all that stuff. So then, when I went up north, they didn't have those... like that school didn't have like AP classes and all that stuff. So, I had to basically just do like...well they had to like come up with the curriculum for me.

I guess they worked with like the local school department, and then, as far as college prep....there was a lady, who just kept working with me because again, I had like a special circumstance. So, from the moment that I got there, she was like, oh, try to do this like she tried to basically get me in college early.”

Renee learned early on that different school systems have different levels of access to resources. This was the reason she decided to go to a small private school and was successful beyond other students that were unaware of such vast educational disparities. Renee explained that she was not entirely shocked by the caliber of students at Bryant University, and that made it easier to focus on excelling.

Ronnie, a current student at Johnson and Wales University, also had a heightened awareness of disparities from educational seesawing between Massachusetts and Rhode Island that ultimately made her decide to attend a private college versus a public one. She explained how her first day of college was. She stated,

It was similar to when [I] came to Woonsocket High School. It was a culture shock from my previous school but definitely the opposite way. [I] was like. Oh, this is how the other half is...I will say I think that academically if I stayed in Massachusetts, it would have prepared me more. Because JWU classes were a step up but they weren't like...they weren't too bad.

But like had I stayed in Massachusetts; they probably would have been even easier.”

This awareness of educational disparities allowed Ronnie to focus hard in college. She believed in the American dream and made sure that her academic journey would set her up for success. However, Ronnie’s awareness of disparities was not as strong as other participants’. Because Ronnie attend Massachusetts and Rhode Island Schools for an even number of years she was not forced to assimilate as frequently as other participants. This impacted her educational performance slightly, causing her to graduate in five years rather than four. Ronnie attributed this to feeling separate from her peers when she began college. She had limited exposure to navigating different educational systems before college causing her ambition to be hindered due to slight intimidation, alienation, and an academic learning curve.

Another participant, Sam, excelled academically in college and noted that she also was not as aware of disparities during high school. She noted,

“My first day of class I remember going to probably one of my favorite classes of my entire college career. It was called Global Flash Points, and it was a first-year seminar course about just like international relations... issues across different countries... And I remember sitting down for the first day, and you know we’re all introducing ourselves, and everybody mostly was from Florida, except for my friend, who happened to be sitting next to me who went to my high school ironically enough, and we both mentioned that we were from the same town of Massachusetts, and that, you know we grew up in New England, and just explaining what that means, and some person mentioned that they had thought New England was a

State.... and that was sort of my first realization that maybe public education isn't the same everywhere.”

Though Sam was unaware of disparities, she noted that her public education was a better education than most other public-school systems. When she entered college, she noted that she was better educated than many other students and did not have a huge learning curve. Sam also is extremely fair-skinned with blue eyes, making it easy for her to pass for a white woman. This made her experience in college different than that of other participants that were of a darker complexion. Sam did not feel out of place, which resulted in high achievement similar to other participants that were already aware of disparities before college.

### *Ignorance Fatigue*

Another theme that played a factor in achieving academic ambitions is ignorance fatigue. I define this as the emotional and physical exhaustion or hopelessness that people of color feel from having to explain to peers why their behavior is ignorant or inappropriate and/or when they experience exhaustion from being in a system where they feel they are constantly treated differently. 6 out of 16 participants experienced noticeable ignorance fatigue. This was because some participants did not complete college and exited or were only in their first semester of college and had not experienced it yet. Ignorance fatigue causes people of color to limit how much they get involved and how much they advocate for themselves.

Steph explained how she felt ignorance fatigue at Bryant. She said,



“I think that it was hard, being a woman on campus. Like, I think being a woman, and then a Black woman is just this feeling like I am being ignored. Like where do all the Black people sit? In the back, in the corners, in the back corners where the soup bar is in the dining hall because we don't want no one to bother. The back corners were a safe place to eat. It's not like people are going to harass you, but people are gonna definitely come down and see you. You feel like people are staring at you, and you just want to eat in peace. It is easier to blend.”

Steph felt it was better to hide in a corner than to fight for systemic change and explained that this was common among people of color. Steph mentioned that this hindered her academic success because she felt robbed of the same opportunities that her white counterparts had. She felt less likely to venture out into the community beyond her swimming and diving team clique and this resulted in her struggling to ever fully assimilate into college. Because of this Steph was unable to find a major that suited her and upon graduating has returned to school again to study an entirely different field.

Jordan, another participant like Steph who did not educationally seesaw, recounted her experience in her undergraduate journey out of state. Jordan experienced swirl and as a result of that experience ignorance fatigue that was so bad that she had no choice but to transfer. She stated that,

“I actually went to Marymount for two years as a fashion merchandising major, and then I transferred, because about midway through me being down there was Trump's election, his first election, and it was crazy... it was absolutely terrifying. There was so much going on and I was tired of explaining things to people and then I saw something very scary in the subway, and I was like God. I sort of got it. If this

woman survives.... I will go back to Rhode Island, and I will switch my major and I will save the world like, please. Just save this lady, and it happened so I kept my promise, and I transferred to URI.”

Although Jordan did not explain what exactly occurred, she made it abundantly clear that ignorance fatigue is a problem at universities. She realized that there were behaviors at Marymount that she had no control over and was tired of trying. She mentioned that she saw it at fraternity parties and in everyday campus life. She felt she had to limit who she was to make those around them feel more comfortable. She felt she had to “take one for the team” on numerous occasions. She explained that she was sexually assaulted while at Marymount University on two separate occasions at a social event with a predominately Black fraternity. Unfortunately, her traumatic experiences were not taken seriously. She shared,

“I think being a woman in college is hard especially for a woman of color because there is a lot of pressure... You can't have too much fun. If you have too much fun and something happens...then it's your fault that it happened to you, because you should have been conscious and not having fun. Or it's like...don't dress too slutty because if you dress too slutty and something happens to you, then it's gonna come back on you. Because ‘why were you outside like that? There's like these really like fucked up like rules and when something bad happens to a woman of color, the people especially don't care. It's really fucked up.”

After her repeated traumatic events at Marymount, Jordan's transfer to the University of Rhode Island showed the distinct differences that BIWOC feel when they are in a community with people they feel supported by. She stated,

“URI (University of Rhode Island) wasn’t like [Marymount]. Like I had like guys like randomly come like, kiss me in the bar and stuff like that which is like, oh, the fuck is wrong with you like, get away from me but it was never as like persistent as at Marymount University...But also at Marymount and URI-- the difference, I think, was like I had to make friends at Marymount University whereas, at URI, I knew people. I had friends so like I think that some people do experience at URI a rape culture, which is like the circumstances, of like being a woman, or like whatever on campus, but I didn't experience that because I was protected by my protection circle up here.”

Jordan showed how being at college can cause some terrible experiences with peers. Unfortunately, Jordan felt defeated and like that was the cost of going to college as a woman. She felt it was worthless to try and change the status quo because she was fatigued by ignorance and fatigued by completely inappropriate and traumatic behavior. However, ignorance fatigue did not result in imposter syndrome or oppositional culture dynamics, though the effects may appear similar. Women of color that have experienced ignorance fatigue may appear to be questioning if they belong or are adequate, but it is because they are trying to fit in spaces where people are constantly trying to dim their light or take advantage. Jordan proved that having a safe environment and having an environment where there are some rules, or some people, that you are already familiar with, makes the adjustment possible. Without knowledge of the *hidden curriculum* or without a safe community to lean on, college becomes inevitably harder, especially for BIWOC.

Ronnie also experienced ignorance fatigue. She noted that she loved her school at first and that she quickly realized how it made her feel. She expressed, “the only thing was, it just lacked diversity. So, I do kind of regret going there. I feel like had I gone to the TD program at URI would have had like a closer community of people that were like me.” Ronnie noted that it wasn’t worth trying to relate to her peers at JWU and that she felt distant. Ronnie’s experience showed that her involvement and ambition were halted being in an environment that lacked diversity; however, she chose to tough it out. However, the fatigue caused her to be in school beyond that average length of time.

Aaliyah, a second-semester freshman, explained how exhausting assimilating to college has been for her as well. She recounted her move-in story which resulted in a case of ignorance fatigue. She said,

“So, over the summer I got [two] random roommate assignments, and it was just easy for [the two of] them to connect because they kind of had like the same... I guess they came from like the same background, and like same values of like, Oh, my God college! We're just here to like, have fun and party. Not really gonna worry about school... It just definitely was very uncomfortable for me to be in the room when they would like do and say passive-aggressive things or they would just kind of like bully me, and they wouldn't respect my space.. like some of my things were moved around, and they both would go like get violently drunk.

So, I would kind of avoid the room as much as I can. I think I only went in there to sleep, and it was just like it was really sad that I couldn't do anything with my roommates like I never went to the dining hall with them. I never connected with them, and I think they always thought of me like as a burden in the room which I mean...I don't like... I don't know why they

would, because I was just never in there, but it's just like moving out, was probably the best thing I could have done.”

Aaliyah, like other participants, noticed early on that many white people had different social norms than people of color. Aaliyah was tired of trying to address systemic issues and avoided her roommates, causing her to suffer, mentally and physically. This caused her to seek out the people that looked like her on campus and limit her involvement beyond her inner circle. This avoidance of people that are white was common among many participants and hindered potential ambition.

Renne also experienced ignorance fatigue. She noted several times feeling a certain energy in predominately white spaces that resulted in her being withdrawn. This caused her to occasionally limit herself. For example, Renne did not think it was worthwhile to communicate with her white professors about her transportation to and from class. She shared the following story,

“One time I had a night class that was like at 6 pm. But that ended at 9, and the last bus was like at 9:03 pm or something like that so like sometimes that was hard. The professor...of that class was kind of rude and he had said some things in the past that made me feel like he didn't really understand people like me. But... I never told him about the bus specifically Because he probably wanted me to figure it out because I felt like [he] didn't care. Like he wasn't gonna say, 'you can leave early because of the bus'. [He] will just be like, 'whatever figure it out, right? Other students get here fine.'”

Though Renne's ignorance fatigue hindered her from expressing the need for additional support, her drive, focus, and disposition allowed her to figure out how to master time management. She only missed the bus one time, and it was because it never showed up. College could have been easier for Renne had she leaned on the resources such as utilizing office hours, networking with professors, and getting involved with clubs and organizations that would give her more support. However, her negative experiences made her hesitant to do so. Fortunately, because Renne had attended a relatively rigorous high school, her drive, focus, and disposition carried her through her successes though she did work a little harder than others.

#### *Drive/Focus/ Disposition*

Another theme that helped women of color successfully achieve their ambitions was their personal drive, focus, and disposition (DFD). Like Renee, many participants had a history of academic promise and dedication. Seven participants had a history of showing academic promise. They noted that they had always excelled academically. When Jane was explaining how driven she was and what caused her to be so successful she explained that her "mom was definitely an inspiration, you know, piquing [her] curiosity, saying like, oh, ask questions... like don't be afraid to speak up you know, like close mouths don't get fed, basically." Because this was instilled in her at a young age, her DFD was beyond her peers. She never had an issue in school. It came naturally to her. This was enough to allow Jane to be unaffected by imposter syndrome. Similarly,

Kayla mentioned that when she was growing up her dad was incarcerated, causing her to step up into a parental role. She shared the following sentiment,

“My siblings always say ‘you were like our mom, you know?’ I made sure dinner was ready, made sure they were ready for bed but I still had to make sure I was able to like handle my responsibilities, and then also make sure that my schooling was taken care of. I excelled in my academics. That was something that I never really struggled with and I worked so I was really kind of someone where I knew, as far as like education would be my only way that I would be able to succeed past you know high school, because after that if I didn't do anything, then I would either be kind of stuck in the same pathways as some of my other classmates or even, you know, family members.”

This mentality is what allowed Kayla to be successful. She was able to recognize that if she continued to focus on academics, she would be able to have a different reality than those around her. She had a disposition that was focused on educational success. Her DFD is what carried her throughout college. Sam also mentioned a natural educational disposition. She stated,

“So my upbringing was pretty tumultuous. I spent a lot of time out of the house. School didn't really become important to me in terms of like being successful at school until maybe my sophomore year of high school. I was always like a gifted kid and like did well in school, naturally. But I didn't start trying until I was probably 16 or 17. I had a guidance counselor sit me down after I was spending a lot of time in Worcester, which is like a rougher city. [And so], one of my school guidance counselors sat me down, and he was like so ‘who are you going to be? Because it's clear that you have a lot going on for you intellectually that you have a lot of promise there, but your commitment to your education has been lackluster up until this point. So, you know it's up to you right now to decide

what kind of adult you want to be and what you want the rest of your life to look like.’

And that was the first time that, like anybody outside of my family had expressed any expectation of me doing well in life and not, in a sense that, like it, would have benefited him, or anything, but in the sense that, like I could do good and I should.”

This encouraged Sam to focus further on her studies. Though Sam had someone express her worth to her, her guidance counselor did not do anything beyond that. Sam’s DFD was naturally there. She just needed the push so that she didn’t fall victim to upholding the code of the street as she associated with friends in Worcester. Sam did not receive mentorship but rather a brief encounter with a new perspective from a neutral third party. Renee also noted that school never was hard for her. She stated,

“I mean, I went to school my whole life, so I mean I guess I was ready to go to school more, but I wasn’t necessarily ready for like other stuff. I feel like I told you before. When I was in school it was very easy like growing up. I didn’t necessarily have to like study or like do that, but I feel like in college. I had to study. I had to like put in more time and effort to get things done and I feel like I had more work, and like more things.... like it never ended as opposed to like in high school you go home and do like an extra hour of homework, and that’s it. But it wasn’t hard. Just more.”

Renee had a strong DFD before college which ultimately allowed her to succeed.

#### *The Flip Side of DFD: Self-limitation*

Many participants also noted limiting their involvement or ability to succeed either subconsciously or intentionally. Participants who lacked DFD in



culmination with educational seesawing tended to limit themselves beyond other participants and were more likely to express an oppositional culture orientation. 5 participants exemplified this limitation and noted that they often struggled with doing what was best for them because they were worried about social codes, stigma, or what their family thought. These participants dismissed support and often switched majors or schools, or struggled to find a job after graduating college. To better understand the difference between participants with a strong DFD versus a weakened DFD, Mimi, a participant that had a strong DFD, and a history of educational seesawing shared her perspective of her peers,

“I saw friends and other people or classmates like leave school and for some of them it was just like...you know like you're.... I hate to be like this, but it was like... You're making excuses like, you know like I saw like I had one friend she left because her mom was sick and it was just like. Well, you know...like you, you can do more like I feel like she could have done more, and though it wasn't me I saw it with Black women often...Knowing the sacrifices I made of not seeing my daughter for years because I knew it would be worth it makes me wonder why others don't do it too”

Sam echoed Mimi's experience and perspective. She confided,

“When I was 9 my dad got into a car accident where he sustained a traumatic brain injury, so he was hospitalized for almost 3 years. And so, when I went to college I felt a tremendous amount of guilt for being so far away during that time and for really just like having all of these amazing experiences and joyful experiences when I knew my family was struggling at home. And I, you know, got some tough tough feedback from family members, particularly on my father's side, about how they felt about me going to

and out of State school and traveling abroad and doing all of these things. It was like my dad was at a skilled nursing facility and ultimately there wasn't anything that I would have been able to do that would have prevented that from happening. I would have just been at home having a less comprehensive education.”

Because Sam had a strong DFD she could relate to Mimi's feelings. She chose to ignore any family influence and judgment and stay in school even though it was hard. She mentioned that people of color care tend too much about living up to family expectations, which can result in self-limitation. Thus, she had to do what was best in the long run for her.

Jordan, a woman from Newport, Rhode Island admitted that she limited herself before college on purpose. She recounted the following story,

“So, I went to basically all Newport public schools, my entire life. So, I went to Prince of Calvert Elementary School, and I guess I got placed in a raffle to go to a private school because my test scores were really high. I don't want to say I was going to be like a diversity hire but, like they wanted to put me in the school because I made their school look more diverse. But I didn't want to go there because I wanted to go to Thompson with all my friends. I didn't want to go to that school at all. No one from my community really went there. It was preppy and so I remembered I purposely failed the entry exam, and I like scored on a second-grade level And [administration was] like we know you flunked this on purpose because the other scores... like they don't match.

So I got sent there. But I lasted at that school for like 2 weeks, because this culture was so different than the public school environment I was used to... and when they exited me from the school, instead of allowing me to go in to get my things. The Dean of the

school like brought out my stuff in like a box because I'm assuming they didn't want... the parents to know that a child was getting pulled [out of the school] like they didn't want to have to explain that situation. So then I ended up going to Thompson with my friends, and that was a much better experience.

Jordan felt safer associating with people she knew in the community in which she was raised. She did have a stigma about the private school before she entered it which factored into her ability to assimilate. However, the school environment did play a factor. Though Jordan's peers teased her for not having UGGs, Jordan did not have the opportunity to see how the environment may change if she had stayed there longer. This ensued into college life where she transferred from her out-of-state institution back to one in her hometown a few years after experiencing an unnamed event that also made her uncomfortable. This resulted in her changing her major, and her career path. Had Jordan remained in the private school, her educational trajectory may have changed and allowed her to find a college that was the right fit sooner.

Steph, a student-athlete, also dealt with multiple bouts of self-limitation. When Steph talked about entering college as an undeclared major that switched to accounting and then to political science, she noted that it never felt right. Steph felt like English wouldn't make her any money. She felt the major was stigmatized and stated that,

"All people like to make fun of like those English majors. And people are like, what are you gonna do with the English major? But I wish I had stuck with what felt right and did like.. well told myself that... You know you can do an English major... I think for me

college was all about who was teaching and not what they were teaching because, as I said, I came in undecided so I guess I was very persuaded on like how I was being taught more than what I was learning.”

Steph, like many BIWOCs, was rightfully concerned about blending in, which she learned during high school. Unfortunately, the negative repercussion is that it hindered her from finding her best fit in college. She limited herself and her aspirations to please those around her and conform. She had been doing it since high school. She stated that in high school, “people were getting made fun of because they were in high waters<sup>12</sup>.” She recalled that in high school,

“There was a kid wearing a designer shirt and everyone was like, Fly, guy! Whoa! And then the next day he wore the same design, or a different shirt and I was like, Wow! Whoa, you went shopping. Oh, my gosh! And he wasn't in my grade. But you know we walk in the same hallway and you like see people like often and the next week he wore those same 2 shirts again. So now the people who actually have like that higher wardrobe were noticing and they're like, ‘Why are you wearing that again?’ And he felt so cool the first week cause he's like oh, oh! And then he wears it again. So now it's like. Oh, you don't have money like we thought you did, because you wearing the same thing again, and people came at him for that.

I even fell for it, too, because I didn't want people talking about me. There was a thing like...like handbags, were like a thing. So, I even fell, for it. I had like a nice handbag, even though it was my sister's. I wore that to like classes to just like fit in. And so I think when I went to college...like my first year. I wanted to like, feel a part of a group like high school.

---

<sup>12</sup> High waters refer to wearing pants that sit above your bellybutton.

So, during my freshman year at Bryant, I stuck with my diving team...even though I didn't relate to them. And I remember my freshman year. I met 2 Black girls, and I think, freshman year I had like the wrong priorities because like they were so friendly to me but every time they wanted to hang out I was like, oh, I have practice. Oh, I have this! Oh, I have that! I wish I would have made a better effort."

Steph limited herself to staying in her predominately white clique where she often felt tokenized and isolated. Steph tried to fit herself into a mold that did not suit her which resulted in her choosing a major that did not align with her. This caused her to enroll in a trade school after graduating with a bachelor's degree.

Lo, like Steph and many other participants who did not educationally seesaw, fell victim to self-limitation as well. When asked if she took advantage of on-campus resources at any of her institutions she said,

"I did it on my own. You know...I wish I did take more advantage of resources...like tutoring or anything of that sort, but no I learned the hard way. I did it all alone because that's what I thought I had to do."

Lo believed that she had to work super hard on her own to be successful and this caused her to limit herself. Yes, Lo was unaware that utilizing resources was standard practice in college because she had never experienced another academic setting, however, her setbacks became her demise. When expressing why she switched her major, Lo said,

I got into the nursing program at RIC, and then I struggled, and then I failed this one class, and then I had to retake it. And then something in my head said....you know I'm not going to do it anymore. I don't want to. I don't want to do it, and now I wish I would have never given up on that...I wish I would

have known it's like just stick with it, and then there's resources out there that I could have used for sure”

Lo noted that she felt she limited herself by giving up after she took time off and expressed remorse.

Another participant, Rain, noted her self-limitation before college. Rain has spina bifida and uses a wheelchair. She explained how she didn't even bother applying to college in high school because she was focused on working on beauty. But later, she said,

“I was offered to take a learning from experience course and just get a feel of the college after graduating high school. And one thing that really interested me is that this college was virtual, and I feel like for me. That's important, because the one thing that had like held me back from trying to attend a college was, how am I going to get there every day, and just dealing with the like health issues that I have like, how am I gonna like do it? How are the instructors even going to work with me on that, and make sure that I get the proper education that I'm looking for?”

Rain had justifiable reservations that could have been alleviated with more guidance earlier. Rain noted that there was not much intervention and guidance in high school and other participants echoed a similar sentiment. Many women limited themselves based on a lack of guidance and made decisions based on the little information that they did have. Much of this information came from a family member with little expertise in college advising and life coaching.

### *Family Influence*

Another prevalent theme was family influence. Women of color were often primarily influenced by family members when making educational and career decisions. Trusting members of the family for guidance was due to a combination of a lack of guidance from outside of the family and a family-inflicted obligation to respect their family's authority. 9 participants relied on family advice when selecting either a college to attend or a college major. This led participants to choose majors that did not suit them and or forced them to conform to a career/school that was not the right fit.

Ally expressed how her mother's influence impacted her academic experience. She stated, "I don't think I felt as fulfilled in like the academic courses, but I think that goes back to like me following like what my mom told me to do, and I think that's where I might have hindered my own experience." Ally chose to study education because her mother told her to. In hindsight, she wished she had not limited her academic selection to what her mother expected of her. Ally mentioned that this is common in households of color. There is an expectation to listen to older people of color because they are seen as wise.

Betty's fate was similar to Ally's but more detrimental. When talking with Betty about why she ultimately went to CCRI for a year she said,

"I think I was young and naive because I felt like...I think I just went because my mom was like oh, you should go to college so and I was just like, oh, yeah, I should go to college because I was like, I just finished

high school. Now, now I get to go to college. So, I felt like I had to go. My mom made me feel like that.”

Betty, like other women of color, trusted the guidance of a parent because they did not receive guidance anywhere else. However, participants that made decisions based on the influence of their parents specifically, tended to make decisions that were not well-informed, resulting in choosing a program that was a terrible fit for them.

Similar problems arose for Steph when she was an undergraduate student. Her mother had put her in sports at a young age to ensure that she would get an athletic scholarship. Because of this, Steph committed to the school that gave her the biggest athletic scholarship and didn't consider it anywhere else. This caused Steph to struggle in college, ultimately graduating with a degree that she did not use. Steph shared that upon graduation the world was consumed with the COVID-19 pandemic and she moved back in with her parents unsure of what to do. She confided,

“Basically everyone was in the medical field in my family, and I wasn't in it because I just have like an undecided personality and like I don't know what I like... I went to undergrad undeclared and it's like I like helping people. That's the one thing I do know. So now that I have graduated and moved back home, my parents are like trying to encourage me, because you know..gotta get a job so like.

My parent's said why don't you do X-ray? Why don't you become a nurse? You could do ultrasound like the neighbor? And so I talked to her and she's like there's like programs for ultrasound. So, for me, it sounds like, you know. I'll do ultrasound. That's how I ended up here in an ultrasound program now.”



Steph relied on following the guidance of her parents during her undergraduate journey. She only attended Bryant because it provided her an opportunity to be on the swimming and diving team like her parents wanted for her. This caused her to remain at a school that wasn't the right fit for her and left her jobless upon graduation forcing her to pivot to a new career avenue. Steph is still unsure of what she wants to do and listening to the guidance of her family because women of color trust parental advice when they lack guidance elsewhere.

Jane, on the contrary, did not follow the guidance of a parent but rather made her decisions by observing her siblings. She shared,

“So, for me, I think that I really got lessons from my siblings. My brother finished a 4-year degree in New England, but my sister... started her 2-year education in New England, hated it, stopped going to school for a year or 2, and then finished her degree somewhere else. But during those 2 years, while she was at home.

Like I saw her really struggle financially like not really having a plan trying to work at different minimum wage jobs and I think that really inspired me to say, hey, like, do I wanna have a job once I graduate? Do I want to be back at my parent's house, and like not have any financial security, because my parents aren't going to support me financially? And then, if I need to support myself financially, what kind of job would I need? So, I think that my siblings were really pivotal in like forcing me to really think about, hey? How do I want to end up like after this, like the schooling portion of my life?

Jane was able to see firsthand what schooling could do from observing family members that made different choices. This enabled her to advocate for herself.

Participants like Jane that made their educational decisions based on observation and not off of doing what they were told, were able to achieve all of their educational aspirations.

### *Literacy: Financial and Education*

The last theme that emerged centered on literacy. 7 participants either had a noticeably increased level of educational or financial literacy, meaning that they understood what college would be the best financial fit for them as well as provide them with a quality education that would help them achieve their professional goals. This allowed them to excel academically and professionally. These participants were often those that had educationally seesawed causing a heightened awareness of disparities and a stronger DFD, However, there were also many other participants who upon graduating left wishing that they knew more about finances and educational opportunities before college. Across the board, many participants overall noted that there was a lack of information that caused them to make oversimplified decisions for life-altering events. Ally stated,

“I think sometimes the focus goes to like, where are you going to college? And I get it. That's the whole thing.. to do it like...take on debt and everything. But I think it should also be like change the conversation to ‘What are you going to do when you get there?’

I think just either fostering that ‘what do you want to do’ or allowing students to learn more about different things they could do while still in high school would be good. And then once you come to college, maybe if you have a better like decision, or you ever feel more confident in your decision to choose something then

fine. But if not, then it's okay to be undeclared and still try different things out. I think I wish that messaging was more.

Ally beautifully captured what many participants felt. When in college women of color often settle for a degree based on the limited information that they had at the time. Many participants expressed that they had switched their major during college or picked one and hyper-fixated on it just to complete the degree.

Overall, for every participant that educationally seesawed before college, they were aware that in different environments there are different social norms. This allowed them to be successful in college without limiting themselves. However, participants who did not educationally seesaw, especially in their primary years, struggled with understanding what education could potentially do for them. There was only one participant that expressed complete satisfaction with her choice of major and that was Jane. What set Jane apart is that she did not rely on family influence, she had experience with educational seesawing, she had a strong DFD and a heightened awareness of disparities, she did not limit herself, and she was not predisposed to ignorance fatigue. Jane expressed,

“I think that for the marketing portion of my major, I did my own research. And like when I was doing my own research on like, okay, how can I like marry my outgoing personality and business, right? Because business will make you money. and then, after doing that kind of like searching on my own and seeing what was out there I was able to talk it over with a guidance counselor.

I saw that marketing was a great fit for that... And for me like financially, I was thinking about like loans,

right? So, my parents did not support my full education. I did come out of school with loans. So, during my like time at Bryant, I was working what?... up to 3 jobs. I think so. I was worried about finances and coming out of school with just a mountain of debt that I would not have the means to pay back. So, I think that that pressure was definitely there.”

Jane had the financial and educational literacy that many women of color, let alone many students in general do not have. She worked jobs to pay for her education and to save up because she did not want loans. Whereas other participants worked jobs to acquire money to support their families or to fund their social involvement. Lo, for example, expressed that she needed to prioritize supporting her family. Although she worked hard to do this she never considered how much more she could support them once she completed college and landed an even better job. She said,

“I always commuted. I didn’t have the luxury to stay on campus because you know, I had to work and I also had to contribute to my family right now so it’s like it was a lot to juggle, so that’s why. It was an up-and-down journey.”

Lo’s dedication to supporting her family played a factor in her college experience. She took on a burden that should not have been hers to carry, but it, unfortunately, landed on her shoulders and that is far too common in underserved communities. This resulted in a nontraditional educational journey. Steph too felt she needed to work a job on campus when she in fact did not have to because her tuition and room and board were covered by her athletic scholarship in conjunction with the generosity of her parents. This impacted her

educational journey. Steph noted that her parents did not give her any money.

She stated,

“[My parents didn’t give me money], which I’m not mad about, but they did not give me money and that’s what made me get a campus job. Like freshman year I barely spent any money and when I asked them, they were like ‘We’re paying for your food, and we’re paying for your room like, what else do you want? What else do you need?’ So, like, you know, I got a job for the social aspect of college like going out to eat with friends, buying alcohol, going to clubs...and yeah.”

Lo and Steph family inflicted priorities that benefit the people around them. They felt obliged to do right by their family and or friends and it caused them both to have an educational journey that was not linear.

Similarly, Betty, a woman who attended an elite private school for High School in Rhode Island, lacked educational and financial literacy. When asked about her college application process she had trouble recollecting the application process. She said,

“You just apply to the colleges, and you send your whatever like you send your like portfolios like I wanted to go to Becker...wait not Becker... Champlain College. I wanted to go to Champlain College, and I set my portfolio and I got into Champlain College, but that is a private college and it was like \$35,000 a year. and it didn’t have any like scholarships or anything. And I was like all my friends were going but I didn’t go because it was like financially a burden. But also I didn’t really want to get into all that debt so, so I didn’t get into the program that I wanted to get into, which was video game design. So I felt like there was no real reason for me to get into all that debt when I didn’t even get into the program that I wanted to pursue.”

Betty mentioned several times that she felt college was a waste of time and that people shouldn't go to college. Betty was unaware that scholarships and financial aid exist and lacked guidance that could have changed her educational and career trajectory. Betty's experience was similar to many participants. She lacked the financial and educational literacy that would have been pivotal in selecting a good college program for her.

Unfortunately, because she did not have the opportunity to see other educational programs, her perception of college was negative. She equated all colleges to be overpriced and worthless and decided to follow what other people of color around her did. She chose to party, drink, and work whatever job she could find that paid the most money at the time.

Although many participants were successful due to having the necessary educational and financial literacy, many of the participants that had obtained graduate-level degrees expressed that they wished they had even more financial or educational literacy before college. Mimi stated,

"I wish that...knowing what I know now, that somebody would have just said like. Maybe there's a better way for college because I had a friend. He went to the military, and I was like you're crazy like you're gonna go get blown up. But I mean it was a smart career move because his school is paying for it now. He doesn't have loans. I'm like. If I know what I know now, I probably would have done trade, school and like, use that as a side hustle, and then went to college.

Mannu echoed Mimi's desire for more literacy before college. She stated,

“I feel like if I would have known what I know now I would have done things a little bit differently, at least financially. Just because I have more access to knowledge, and I also have access to knowing what makes money. I didn't know anything back then. So, you know, sometimes working hard. Doesn't mean money. It just means you're working a lot for no reason.

I would have done something else whether that was taking a course on trading or doing stocks, or even since high school like, I would have put my mind to by real state something like that and get passive income, because people don't know about passive income, at least like when you come from like a low-income household.

When you're in high school you have plenty of time to learn all this stuff and about all these financial vehicles that they just don't teach you about in high school.. like I would have started my credit way earlier..like my mom ruined her credit and if I would have known how credit worked, I would have been able to help her, and probably would have helped each other in the long run.

Mannu pointed out that there is a lack of financial literacy in low-income communities, especially communities primarily of color. Because of this, children are not able to break barriers sooner and become products of their environment. Mannu fortunately was able to attend school in both Columbia and Rhode Island, and this allowed her the ability to adapt to different communities and learn skills that could have lacked.

## CONCLUSION

Although this research is focused on BIWOC, I would be remiss to not acknowledge the struggles that white women also can face when assimilating to

college life. Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) illustrate that 23% of black high school graduates enroll in relatively selective four-year schools, compared with 45% of whites. They also indicate that class is directly correlated with attending a four-year university and thus it is not surprising that many white women attend. They recount the story of a white student names Hannah who shared,

“My cousin just graduated from Georgetown this year. And my other cousin is at NYU. Patricia [is] gonna be the smartest out [of] all of them, by far. She’s a genius. She got higher than me on SATs in the 7th grade. Me, Emily, and Jason are like really dumb. My other two cousins, they both go to Georgetown too” (29).

Hannah’s story exemplifies that race and ethnicity do not make someone predisposed to being successful. Regardless of access to resources, not every white woman will be successful. Thus it is imperative to note that the struggles that BIWOC face when assimilating to college can also apply to white women.

Furthermore, when revisiting the following research questions, 1) how do the experiences of BIWOC, before enrollment, affect their ability to attain their educational aspirations? 2) Do BIWOC have a collectivist conception of identity? And 3) are BIWOC utilizing campus resources to aid with matriculation? The research shows that the experiences that BIWOC students have before college matriculation greatly affect their ability to achieve their educational aspirations.



BIWOC are more likely to succeed if they have been immersed in a magnitude of different learning environments before college, and are privileged poor, or affluent. Because more than half of the participants experienced seesawing during their primary years, they had a stronger DFD, a better understanding of the college application and college selection process, and a heightened awareness of disparities in the education system based on race, which allowed them to understand how crucial it was to take advantage of opportunities that would diminish any learning curve and set them up for success. Furthermore, BIWOC did have a moderately collectivist conception of identity and noted that there was a social code they felt they adhere to in certain environments. However, all participants used Black Respectability Politics as a tactical strategy to either avoid hostility or to help achieve their goals.

Moreover, the aspirations of BIWOC were based on their ability or inability to assimilate successfully into college. Those who took advantage of campus resources to some extent had an increased likelihood of doing well in college. Additionally, assimilation was deeply affected by whether the participant had educationally seesawed during their educational journey or not. While there were success stories for participants who did not educationally seesaw, those who did were more likely to have graduated within four years with a job lined up after college or with graduate school on their horizons.

### *Limitations*

This study has several limitations. Because the sample size was 15 participants and an autoethnography, it was rather small. Since participants were required to live in Rhode Island or attend a Rhode Island Institution, their experiences may not reflect those of the broader population. These factors reduce the representativeness of the sample and mean that it is not generalizable.

Had the research team interviewed both BIWOC and white women, we would be able to see if there were substantial differences in the attainment of aspirations. However, because only BIWOC were interviewed there is no way to tell if the findings are unique to BIWOC or represent more common experiences.

Lastly, this study was not longitudinal. Because the study was constricted to a time frame the research was inevitably limited. If the study was conducted longitudinally the researcher could have utilized other methods to assess the experiences of BIWOC more accurately. Because the research team had to rely on the accounts of the participants there was no way to verify the validity and reliability of the stories<sup>13</sup>.

### *Policy Implications*

The voices of these participants all point to a few major problems in our education system. Women of color expressed that they were sheltered from the

---

<sup>13</sup> Thus, the method itself was a limitation as focus groups and observations were not used to confirm the accuracy of the situations expressed by participants.

realities of the world unless they have educationally seesawed. This affected how well they were able to assimilate into college. Therefore institutions should consider the following four policy implications:

1. Creating safe spaces for dialogue
2. Offering free trial classes for prospective students
3. Increasing community partnerships to educate high school students about disparities in the education system.
4. Conducting further research

These research-driven policy recommendations can help institutions make tangible changes to best support BIWOC students.

#### *Safe Spaces for Dialogue*

. Participants explained that they often felt like there was a lack of space on campus to talk about issues that were plaguing their day-to-day reality. This directly affects how they acted, who they associated with, and what activities they got involved with. The research shows that if institutions create more spaces for dialogue, BIWOC will be more successful in achieving their goals. This was exemplified by Steph when she talked about her experience at Bryant. Steph shared,

“My junior year, Bryant developed woke athletes... We had like meetings about diversity with all athletes, and the meetings were sometimes just very general, like, okay, just make sure you're treating everyone kind and then there were also deeper meetings. One

year we had like a really deep guy and he led a student-wide diversity thing.

It was like a really good thing. And then during the event, the guy was like, 'Does anyone have anything to share? How are you feeling blah blah blah?' And the girl that started it.. she went off.

She read something like this: You're pretty for a Black girl. You have nice hair for a Black girl. You're like blah blah blah for a Black girl, and these are all things that people at Bryant had said to her and she, like her speech, was like. Why is it like you know, like for a Black girl? If I wasn't Black, I wouldn't experience this like I don't know. It was just like this whole deep speech of these, like backhanded compliments because of her like. I don't know, like white features...

And then boom we got this community that is basically a safe place for athletes to come together and talk about things that we don't usually talk about to each other. I was like, Wow."

Whilst many institutions have multicultural centers and preorientation programs and facilitate mandatory diversity training for students and staff, many are failing to create safe spaces where dialogue continually happens. The research shows that women of color need opportunities to be in an environment where they are heard. These spaces should take the form of small semi-structured conversations (Cook-Sather 2021).

These sessions should be implemented in the first semester or the summer leading up to college and discuss different career avenues and major offerings, different resources and supports that exist on campus, and explain that there are educational disparities in high school that might put students at a disadvantage now. This transparency will allow BIWOC a much-needed reality

check of their adversity that will inspire them to take advantage of campus resources. The Woke Athletes program is a great starting point, but the student population beyond the athletic circle needs access to similar support.

### *Free Trials*

In addition to creating safe spaces for dialogue, the research shows that institutions should create more avenues for BIWOC to visit the campus before attendance and explain the institution's history and its relationship to underrepresented communities (Ku 2020). While many institutions do allow opportunities for students to come shadow or visit the campus, it is inequitable. Many students simply cannot afford to visit several institutions and even when they can, the visit is often so short that the student cannot develop an accurate assessment of the campus culture. Many interviewees expressed that they felt that their college and or major was not the best fit for them except for one participant. Rain had the opportunity to take a free trial course of College Unbound before deciding to commit. She shared,

“So I was offered to take a learning from experience course and just get a feel of the college. And so like...once I tried that learning-from-experience class was when I realized that the instructors themselves, are just very helpful, and they're always there when you need their help and just learning how or just experiencing how their teaching their students was like intriguing to me like I love that they are interested in what the student is interested in and not like just like what they want. You're not taking a specific major like you're exploring your interest and building leadership skills out of that. So, I just thought the way that they teach is like a way that I can understand in

the best way possible, and like keep being interested in coming to like class all the time.”

Rain expressed what many BIWOC echoed. She had doubts about college and did not have a lot of guidance in high school. By College Unbound allowing her to take an exploratory class, she was able to identify that it was a good fit and feel more invested in the mission of the college. This has allowed her to excel academically because her sense of belonging has increased. Other institutions should allow first-generation and BIWOC students to take exploratory classes or shadow a series of classes to gauge if the college is the best fit for them. In fact, in a research study about Free Trials for software, 7-day free trials had a 5.59% increase rate in subscriptions (Yoganarasimhan et al. 2020). Thus, if Institutions used a similar marketing strategy, both enrollment and retention of BIWOC students will increase.

### *Community partnerships*

In addition to creating a safe space for continued dialogue and allowing BIWOC to take free trial courses, the testimonies above show that institutions could benefit from continued collaboration with local community partnerships, especially with high schools. Students who educationally seesawed had more exposure to different resources which ultimately allowed them to be better advocates for themselves in college, as well as making them more likely to utilize resources, making their college assimilation easier. Because of this, institutions should target organizations that are under-resourced to educate youth on the realities of educational disparities.

Of the participants that struggled at attaining their goals, had interruptions in their higher education journey, or were unable to complete college altogether, they all were unaware that they were at a disadvantage. They believed that they had the tools to be successful and were shocked when they got to college and the learning curve was too steep. Many colleges do work with college access programs and high schools, but the emphasis is on exposure and building a college-going culture and less on showcasing the disparities that currently plague the university. By being transparent with students about the upcoming hurdles at whatever institution they attend and by showing students the differences in school systems across the country and offering resources to help bridge the gap students will be more likely to utilize those resources. Aaliyah exemplified the need for this when she articulated her experience at Providence College. She shared,

“I didn’t know I’d feel like alone in a place where you deserve to be, obviously. Academically, like I got into PC. Along with all the other kids that were qualified to get into it. It’s just kind of weird being in a place where nobody wants to associate with you, and that they feel that like you aren’t really worthy of being there... [and over the summer] I worked a lot like I was working 40 to 50 hours a week, and I never really had a lot of time to mentally prepare myself for college like I think I stopped working 2 days before I moved in.

So, I didn’t have a lot of time to process any of it like those last 2 days. I was packing everything, trying to say like bye to my friends who hadn’t already left yet, and I kind of wish I took the time like maybe a week off, of working to just like kind of watch some Youtube videos read some things that would have helped me adjust a little bit better. And also like, just done, a little

bit more of like personal work before I went into all of this new stuff because I'm not saying I went in completely blind. But I definitely went in with the assumption that, like I was, gonna be fine and that it wasn't going to be a hard adjustment at all, when, in fact, it was, it was really uncomfortable at times.”

Aaliyah would have benefited from some more awareness about what college is like. Thus, institutions could greatly benefit from taking a transparent approach when recruiting BIWOC. Instead of explaining all of the great resources available on campus, they should spend time educating high school students on why the resources need to exist in the first place. Research shows that “many first-generation students lack insight about why they are struggling and do not understand how students 'like them' can improve” (Jaschik 2014).

This could be done by offering a sociology course focused on the sociology of education to prospective students. This class could be taught by current university students as part of a capstone course and take place during winter or summer break. It could count as course credit for the student teaching the class and also count as an elective course for the high school student taking the class. This will allow high school students to get a first-hand account of the realities of the education system in the United States while beginning their assimilation to college life early.

#### *Future research*

Future researchers should conduct a longitudinal study about the implications of Respectability Politics on both white women and BIWOC to compare their experiences. Similarly, a study with BIWOC and BIMOC (Black,



Indigenous, or Men of Color), should be conducted. This would allow researchers to assess if there are differences in aspirational attainment based on race and gender. Furthermore, a study with immigrants of color should also be conducted to see if there are differences in attainment between immigrants of color and BIPOC from the United States. Additionally, future research should aim to identify if the collectivist identity of BIPOC impacts educational attainment.

Furthermore, many participants mentioned instances of mental health issues, physical health issues, and traumatic events that influenced their successes. A future study that is solely focused on health issues, assault, and trauma experienced among BIWOC college students is needed to address if it affects the attainment of goals. These hurdles were unique and were noted within Black fraternities, predominately Black communities, and Black party scenes. These struggles affected many participants who did not educationally seesaw which could impact their attainment levels.

Lastly, this study provided a framework for a new phenomenon called educational seesawing, which is when a student travels back and forth between distinctly different school systems before college or between their undergraduate degrees and post-graduate degrees. Future research should further explore the benefits and repercussions for individuals that educationally seesaw before college as well as during their undergraduate and graduate school journeys. This research argues that those that educationally seesawed showed noticeably

higher retention and success rates during college, which could provide a groundbreaking breakthrough in policy reform for BIWOC students.

## REFERENCES

- Ainsworth-Darnell, James W., and Douglas B. Downey. 1998. "Assessing the Oppositional Culture Explanation for Racial/Ethnic Differences in School Performance." *American Sociological Review* 63(4):536-541.
- Anderson, Elijah. 2000. *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Anon. 1964. "Civil Rights Act of 1964." Retrieved April 11, 2023
- Anon. 2020. "COVID-19 / Safe Steps to Safe Schools - Report Cards - COVID-19 Testing School Report Card." *Los Angeles Unified School Department*. Retrieved April 11, 2023 (<https://achieve.lausd.net/covidreportcard>).
- Anon. n.d. "The NCES Fast Facts Tool Provides Quick Answers to Many Education Questions (National Center for Education Statistics)."
- Armstrong, Elizabeth A., and Laura T. Hamilton. 2013. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. London, England: Harvard University Press.
- Bazo Vienrich, Alessandra. 2021. "'I Used to Be One of Them': Reflections on Researching DACA Students as a DACA Beneficiary." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education: QSE* 34(8):700–714. doi: 10.1080/09518398.2021.1956623.
- Bernard, Donte L., Lori S. Hoggard, and Enrique W. Neblett. 2018. "Racial Discrimination, Racial Identity, and Impostor Phenomenon: A Profile Approach." *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology* 24(1):51–61.
- Berzin, Stephanie. C. 2010. "Educational Aspirations among Low-Income Youths: Examining Multiple Conceptual Models." *Children & Schools* 32(2):112–24.
- Blake, Mary Kate. 2018. "All Talk and No Action? Racial Differences in College Behaviors and Attendance." *Sociological Perspectives* 61(4):553–72.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "Forms of Capital." *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* 41–258.
- Brown, William T., and James M. Jones. 2004. "The Substance of Things Hoped for: A Study of the Future Orientation, Minority Status Perceptions, Academic Engagement, and Academic Performance of Black High School Students." *The Journal of Black Psychology* 30(2):248–73.
- Calarco, Jessica Mccrory. 2020. *A Field Guide to Grad School A Field Guide to Grad School: Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Clance, Pauline Rose, and Suzanne Ament Imes. 1978. "The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention." *Psychotherapy* 15(3):241–47.
- Cook-Sather, Alison, and Khadijah Seay. 2021. "‘I Was Involved as an Equal Member of the Community’: How Pedagogical Partnership Can Foster a Sense of Belonging in Black, Female Students." *Cambridge Journal of Education* 51(6):733–50. doi: 10.1080/0305764x.2021.1926926.
- Courtney L. McCluney, Kathrina Robotham, Serenity Lee, Richard Smith, and Myles Durkee. 2019. "The Costs of Code-Switching." *Harvard Business Review*, Website accessed DATE, (<https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-costs-of-codeswitching>)
- Du Bois, W.E.B. 1897. "Strivings of the Negro People." *Atlantic Monthly* August 1, 1897:194-98.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics." *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 57–80.
- de los Santos Jr, Alfredo and Irene Wright. 1990. "Maricopa’s Swirling Students: Earning One-Third of Arizona State’s Bachelors Degrees." *Community, Technical & Junior College Journal* 60(6): 32-34.
- Lee Furbeck, Bruce Clemetsen, and Andrew Hibel. 2015. "The ‘Swirling’ Student: Best Practices to Engage Transfer Students on Your Campus." *HigherEdJobs*. Retrieved April 11, 2023 (<https://www.higheredjobs.com/HigherEdCareers/interviews.cfm?ID=720>)
- Harris, A. L. 2006. "I (Don’t) Hate School: Revisiting Oppositional Culture Theory of Blacks’ Resistance to Schooling." *Social Forces; a Scientific Medium of Social Study and Interpretation* 85(2):797–834.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. 1992. "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 17 (2): 251–74.
- Jack, Anthony Abraham. 2020. *The Privileged Poor the Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Jamison, Leslie. 2023. "Why Everyone Feels Like They’re Faking It." *New Yorker (New York, N.Y.: 1925)*, February 6.
- Jaschik, Scott. 2014. "Study: 1-Hour Program Can Close Achievement Gap for First Generation College Students." *Inside Higher Ed | Higher Education News, Events and Jobs*. Retrieved April 11, 2023 (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/02/17/study-1-hour->

- program-can-close-achievement-gap-first-generation-college-students).
- Levesque, Roger J. R. 2018. "Impostor Phenomenon." Pp. 1869–71 in *Encyclopedia of Adolescence*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Kabalkin, Nicole P. 2021. "Addressing Barriers to College Completion for BIPOC First Generation Students: Recommendations to Improve Students' Sense of Belonging and College Persistence Outcomes." D.S.W. dissertation, School of Social Policy and Practice, The University of Pennsylvania.
- Kendall, Diana. 2012. *Sociology in Our Times: The Essentials*. 9th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Ku, Ailun. 2020. "Lessons for Engaging and Retaining BIPOC Students." *The Opportunity Network*. Retrieved April 11, 2023 (<https://opportunitynetwork.org/insights/lessons-for-engaging-and-retaining-bipoc-students/>).
- Martinez-Cola, Marisela. 2020. "Collectors, Nightlights, and Allies, Oh My: White Mentors in the Academy." *Understanding & Dismantling Privilege* 101):61–82.
- McCluney, Courtney L., Kathrina Robotham, Serenity Lee, Richard Smith, and Myles Durkee. 2019. "The Costs of Code-Switching." *Harvard Business Review*, November 15.
- Meraji, Shereen Marisol, Natalie Escobar, and Kumari Devarajan. 2020. "Is It Time to Say R.i.p. to 'POC'?" *NPR*, September 30.
- Ogbu, John U. 2004. "Collective Identity and the Burden of 'Acting White' in Black History, Community, and Education." *The Urban Review* 36(1):1–35.
- Obasogie, Osagie K, and Newman, Zachary. 2016. "Black Lives Matter and Respectability Politics in Local News Accounts of Officer-Involved Civilian Deaths: An Early Empirical Assessment." *Wisconsin Law Review* 541 (3): 541–74.
- Osborne, Jason W. 1999. "Unraveling Underachievement among African American Boys from an Identification with Academics Perspective." *The Journal of Negro Education* 68(4):555-557.
- Manning, Philip. 2020. "Erving Goffman and Dramaturgical Sociology." Pp. 226-49 in the *Cambridge Handbook of Social Theory*. Vol. 1, edited by P. Kivisto. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Perlman, Merrill. 2015. "Black and White: Why Capitalization Matters." *Columbia Journalism Review*. Retrieved December 11, 2022 ([https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language\\_corner\\_1.php](https://www.cjr.org/analysis/language_corner_1.php)).

- Jodi-Ann Burey and Ruchika Tulshyan, 2021. "Stop Telling Women They Have Imposter Syndrome." *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved (<https://hbr.org/2021/02/stop-telling-women-they-have-imposter-syndrome>).
- Sekaquaptewa, Denise, Andrew Waldman, and Mischa Thompson. 2007. "Solo Status and Self Construal: Being Distinctive Influences Racial Self-Construal and Performance Apprehension in African American Women." *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology* 13(4):321–27.
- Shavers, Marjorie C., and James L. Moore. 2019. "The Perpetual Outsider: Voices of Black Women Pursuing Doctoral Degrees at Predominantly White Institutions." *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 47(4):210–26.
- Sonnak, Carina, and Tony Towell. 2001. "The Impostor Phenomenon in British University Students: Relationships between Self-Esteem, Mental Health, Parental Rearing Style and Socioeconomic Status." *Personality and Individual Differences* 31(6):863–74.
- Tyson, Karolyn, William Darity Jr, and Domini R. Castellino. 2005. "It's Not 'a Black Thing': Understanding the Burden of Acting White and Other Dilemmas of High Achievement." *American Sociological Review* 70(4):582–605.
- Whaley, Arthur L., and La Tonya Noël. 2011. "Sociocultural Theories, Academic Achievement, and African American Adolescents in a Multicultural Context: A Review of the Cultural Incompatibility Perspective." *Social Psychology of Education: An International Journal* 14(2):149–68.
- Xu, Duoduo. 2018. "From Poverty to Prosperity: College Education, Noncognitive Abilities, and First-Job Earnings." *Chinese Sociological Review* 50(1):53–82.
- Yoganarasimhan, Hema, Ebrahim Barzegary, and Abhishek Pani. 2020. *Design and Evaluation of Personalized Free Trials*.

## APPENDICES

### *Appendix A: Recruitment Email*

Hello All!

I hope this email finds you well. Sara Gilkenson, a graduate student at Rhode Island College in the Justice Studies program is seeking participants for her required master's thesis. Her thesis is about educational aspirations and educational attainment for Black, Indigenous and Women of Color (BIWOC). She is interested in interviewing folks from this population, specifically those who identify as a woman, have attended at least one college course, and are between the ages of 18 and 35. Although there is some prior research that is focused on this population and this topic, there is not enough.

If interested, please fill out this qualifying survey form to indicate interest. Once this is complete, the research team will contact you via email to schedule an interview around your schedule. **If you do not meet the eligibility requirements, you will not be contacted to schedule an interview.** The interview will take place in zoom or in-person, and it will take an hour - an hour and a half of your time. The interviews will also be audio-recorded with your full consent. The virtual audio-recordings will be conducted directly on zoom by recording the zoom sessions and saving it on a password protected computer. Participants will have the option to have their camera on or off during the interview while on zoom. In-person interviews will be recorded using an iPhone and then uploaded on a password protected account.

You will also be asked to sign a consent form prior to doing the interview as required by RIC. It will ultimately be up to you if you want to participate in the study. You can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or judgement. Your information will be kept confidential. There is no compensation for participating in this study. For more information, please view the attached flyer (page 2 of this document). Sara is also happy to answer any questions you might have about the research process. If you have any questions, you can contact her via email [sgilkenson\\_7535@email.ric.edu](mailto:sgilkenson_7535@email.ric.edu). Thank you for taking your time in reading this email. Please pass this email along to other students that you think can be potential participants in her study. Enjoy the rest of your day.



ATTENTION!

# Women of Color Students

We are looking for Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color (BIWOC) to participate in a research study about educational aspirations and attainment.



SCAN HERE



## What we need:

- Please encourage your Black and Brown friends to participate
- Share this flyer on social media
- Scan the QR code to confirm your interest in the study

This is a great opportunity to shed light on your personal experiences being a BIPOC women in the college atmosphere. Your help is greatly appreciated!

## QUESTIONS?



SGILKENSON\_7535@EMAIL.RIC.EDU

## NEXT STEPS:

After completing the survey above, eligible participants will be emailed to schedule a one - one and a half hour zoom call, or in-person interview

[https://ric.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_3gWUpAefBlknM7s](https://ric.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3gWUpAefBlknM7s)



*Appendix C- Qualifying Survey*

**Educational Attainment and Aspirations of Women of Color**

**Start of Block: Description**

You are being asked to be in a research study about your educational aspirations as a woman of color. Participation in this study is voluntary and it is anticipated that you would be involved for 1-2 hours. 10-15 minutes will be used to complete the following qualifying survey and 1-1.5 hours will be allocated for a follow-up interview should you be selected and consent to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions that you have before choosing whether to be involved in the study or not. If you do not meet the eligibility requirements, you will not be contacted upon completion of this qualifying survey and all of your information will be immediately deleted.

If you have any questions please email Sara Gilkenson at: [sgilkenson\\_7535@email.ric.edu](mailto:sgilkenson_7535@email.ric.edu) or Dr. Mikaila Arthur at [marthur@ric.edu](mailto:marthur@ric.edu).

Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

Q1 Do you consent to participate in this survey?

Yes (1)

No (2)

**Skip To: End of Survey If Do you consent to participate in this survey? = No**

\_\_\_\_\_

Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

Q2 What is your chosen pseudonym, if selected to participate in an interview?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

Q3 What is your email address? (This will only be used to schedule an interview)

---

-----

Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

Q4 Gender?

- Man (1)
- Woman (2)
- Non-binary (3)
- Other (4)

**Skip To: End of Survey If Gender? = Man**



Q5 What is your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual or Straight (1)
- Gay or Lesbian (3)
- Bisexual (4)
- Other (5)
- Prefer not to say (6)

-----

Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

Q6 Are you between 18 years of age and 35 years of age?

Yes (8)

No (9)

*Skip To: End of Survey If Are you between 18 years of age and 35 years of age?  
= No*

Page Break \_\_\_\_\_

Q7 What is your ethnicity? (Select all that apply)

American Indian or Alaska Native (4)

Asian American (5)

Black or African American (6)

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (7)

Caucasian (8)

Multi-racial (9)

Prefer not to say (10)

-----  
Q8 Do you identify as Hispanic or Latinx?

Yes (1)

No (2)

-----

Q9 You are not just a box! If you would like to provide more details about your ethnicity, such as what country you are from, please utilize this space to elaborate:

---

Q10 What is your highest level of education received?

- Less than High School (1)
- High School (2)
- GED (3)
- Some College (4)
- 2-year college (Assoc. Degree) (5)
- 4-year college (BA/ BS degree) (6)
- Graduate Degree (7)

*Skip To: End of Survey If What is your highest level of education received? = Less than High School*

*Skip To: End of Survey If What is your highest level of education received? = High School*

*Skip To: End of Survey If What is your highest level of education received? = GED*

---

Q11 In what year did you first take a college course?

---

Q12 What state did you spend the majority of your years before attending your first college course?

---

Q13 In what state/ states have you attended college?

---



Q14 What college do/did you attend (undergrad)? (Select all that apply)

- I am not currently enrolled in college (1)
- Brown University (2)
- Bryant University (3)
- College Unbound (4)
- Community College of Rhode Island (5)
- Johnson and Wales University (11)
- Naval War College (15)
- New England Institute of Technology (6)
- Providence College (7)
- Rhode Island College (9)
- Rhode Island School of Design (8)
- Roger Williams University (10)
- Salve Regina University (12)
- University of Rhode Island (13)
- Other College (14)



Q15 If other, please write your college below:

---

Q16 When do/ did you graduate college?

---

Q17 If you have not completed college, what year did you exit college?

---

Q18 Are you interested in participating in a one-hour interview about your educational aspirations, attainment level, and experience?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Maybe (I would like more information before I make my decision) (3)

Q19 Do you have any questions, comments, or concerns?

---

Page Break 

---

---

## *Appendix D- Interview Questions*

### **Interview Guide**

First, I am going to start with some basic demographic information. As a reminder, you can skip any question that you want and stop the interview at any time.

#### Demographic:

1. What is your pseudonym?
2. Tell me about your background. Where are you from?
3. Tell me about your family growing up. What were they like?
4. Tell me about your living situation when you were growing up.
5. Tell me about your family today.
  - a. Are you married? Do you have any kids?
6. Tell me about your educational background.
  - a. Where did you attend high school? How was the college application process? What colleges have you attended? What were you/ are you studying in college? What colleges have you completed? Did you commute to college or live on campus?

#### Aspirations:

1. Why did you go to college? What did you want to get out of it?
2. Tell me about your first day on the college campus. How were you feeling? What was it like?
3. Tell me about your first day of college classes. What was that like? How did you feel?
4. What was your favorite class and why?
5. When you were in college what were the activities or things that you participated in outside of the classroom?
6. Tell me about what was going on outside of school that may have impacted your academic experience.
7. What are some of the hardest things to deal with in college? Was there anything that got in the way of your ability to succeed?
8. What helped you with your successes?

9. Talk to me more about college support. What were some of the emotional supports you had in college?
10. Were there any college classes that had an impact on your personal or professional life and well-being?
11. How was the overall culture of the campus? Did you feel like you belonged?
12. What was it like being a woman at your college? What was it like being a woman of color?
  - a. Did you feel your authentic self while at college?
13. Tell me more about your readiness for college. How did you assimilate to college life? Did you feel ready?
14. Tell me about your family and friends during the matriculation year. What were their reactions when you got accepted to college? How was your relationship with them during college?
15. Talk to me about any friendships/ relationships/ partnerships you established while in college.
  - a. Did these relationships affect any of your relationships outside of school?
16. Talk about any regrets about college or things you wish you would have known/ done differently.
17. Tell me about your goals for the future.
  - a. Would you go back to college?
18. Looking back on your answer to why you went to college- do you feel like you achieved that goal?
19. Tell me about how your experiences in college aligned with your goals in college or expectations of what college was.
20. Was there anything or anyone that held you back from living up to your potential?
21. If there was one piece of advice you could have given yourself when deciding to go to college, what would it be?
22. Do you have any remaining thoughts or comments?



Appendix E- IRB Approval

**IRB: #2223-2353 (Arthur, Mikaila) approved**



**From:** [NoReply@TOPAZTI.net](mailto:NoReply@TOPAZTI.net)  
**To:** [marthur@ric.edu](mailto:marthur@ric.edu), [irb@ric.edu](mailto:irb@ric.edu)

Greetings,  
The proposal for the project referenced below has been APPROVED by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Project title: Educational Aspirations of BIPOC College Aged Women

Approval #: 2223-2353  
Type of review: Expedited  
Proposal type: Original  
Principle Investigator: Arthur, Mikaila  
Fees received: 1. No fees -- RIC supervised or sponsored  
Funding status:  
Approval date: 11/4/2022

Click here to access the protocol: <https://ricprod.topazti.net/Elements?emailLink=11%2c102%2c125309>



PROVIDENCE COLLEGE  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
Harkins Hall, Room 208  
Providence, Rhode Island

September 19, 2022

Ms. Sara Gilkenson  
School of Business  
Providence College

Dear Sara:

The [Institutional Review Board \(IRB\)](#) has reviewed and approved your application for the following project:

**Title:** Educational Aspirations of BIPOC College Aged Women  
**Type of Review:** Exemption Review  
**Protocol Number:** 23-008

*Appendix F Consent Form*

**CONSENT DOCUMENT**

**Rhode Island College**

The Educational Aspirations of College-Aged Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color (BIWOC)

You are being asked to be in a research study about your educational aspirations as a woman of color. Participation in this study is voluntary and it is anticipated that you would be involved for 1-1.5 hours. You are being asked because you are a woman of color that has attended at least one college course, between the age of 18-35. Please read this form and ask any questions that you have before choosing whether to be in the study.

Sara Gilkenson, a graduate student in Justice Studies, is conducting this research in collaboration with faculty advisor Dr. Arthur, a professor at Rhode Island College.

**Why this Study is Being Done (Purpose(s))**

We are doing this study to learn more about the barriers for women of color when working on fulfilling their educational aspirations. We are also looking at why educational aspirations are attainable for some women of color and not for others.

**What You Will Have to Do (Procedures)**

If you choose to be in the study, we will ask you to complete the following list:

- You'll talk with me and answer questions I have about your life and your educational aspirations. I will ask how your life was before starting college, how you felt during your adjustment process during college, and how you are feeling now. I will ask about your self-perceived preparation for college. I will ask about the support received during college. I will ask about barriers to your aspirations. I will ask about your goals. This will take about one to one and a half hours.

**Risks or Discomforts**

You may find that answering some questions is upsetting. We think it would be similar to the kinds of things you talk about with family and friends. You can skip any questions you don't want to answer, and you can stop the interview at any time. If you are a current student and want to talk to someone about your feelings or about problems that you're having, the research team can provide you with the contact information for counseling services at your institution. If you are not a current student, you can contact a licensed professional at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us>. They may charge a fee for their services which is paid by you. We will not pay this fee.

### **Benefits of Being in the Study**

Being in this study will not benefit you directly. There is no compensation for being in this study.

### **Deciding Whether to Be in the Study**

Being in the study is your choice to make. Nobody can force you to be in the study. You can choose not to be in the study, and nobody will hold it against you. You can change your mind and quit the study at any time, and you do not have to give a reason. If you decide to quit later, nobody will hold it against you.

### **How Your Information Will be Protected**

Because this is a research study, results will be summarized across all participants and shared in reports that we publish and presentations that we give. We will take several steps to protect the information you give us so that you cannot be identified. Instead of using your name, your information will be given a pseudonym of your choosing. The information will be kept in a locked office file and seen only by the research team. Data collected virtually will be stored using password-protected accounts that are only accessible by the research team. The only time we would have to share information from the study is if it is subpoenaed by a court, or if you are suspected of harming yourself or others, then we would have to report it to the appropriate authorities. Additionally, if there are problems with the study, the records may be viewed by the Rhode Island College review board responsible for protecting the rights and safety of people who participate in research. The information will be kept for a minimum of three years after the study is over, after which it will be destroyed.

### **Who to Contact**

You can ask any questions you have now. If you have any questions later, you can contact Sara Gilkenson at [sgilkenson\\_7535@email.ric.edu](mailto:sgilkenson_7535@email.ric.edu) or Dr. Mikaila Arthur at [marthur@ric.edu](mailto:marthur@ric.edu) or 401-456-8681

If you think you were treated badly in this study, have complaints, or would like to talk to someone other than the researcher about your rights or safety as a research participant, please contact the IRB Chair at [IRB@ric.edu](mailto:IRB@ric.edu). If you are a student of Providence College, please contact [IRB@providence.edu](mailto:IRB@providence.edu). You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read and understand the information above. I am choosing to be in the study “The Educational Aspirations of College-Aged Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color.” I can change my mind and quit at any time. I don’t have to give a reason. I have been given answers to the questions I asked, or I will contact the researcher with any questions that come up later. I am at least 18 years of age.

**Media Recording**

I \_\_\_agree \_\_\_do not agree to be audio recorded for this study.

Print Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Researcher Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Local Counseling Resources**

If you would like to talk to someone about personal matters, please contact a licensed professional using the list below. If you are a current student, your institution may offer counseling services for little to no cost. If you are not a current student, there are other resources available to assist you. Please be advised that professionals may charge a fee for their services which will be paid by you. We will not pay this fee.

### ***Counseling Services at Rhode Island Institutions***

- **Brown University Counseling Services** | 401-863-3476
- **Bryant University Counseling Services** | 401-232-6045
- **College Unbound Counseling Services** | support@collegeunbound.edu
- **Community College of Rhode Island Counseling Services** | 401-825-1240 • **Johnson and Wales University Counseling Services** | 401-598-1016
- **Naval War College Counseling Services** | 1-800-273-8255
- **New England Institute of Technology Counseling Services** | 401-739-5000 • **Providence College Counseling Services** | 401-865-2343
- **Rhode Island College Counseling Services** | 401-456-4673
- **Rhode Island School of Design Counseling Services** | 401-454-6637
- **Roger Williams University Counseling Services** | 401-254-3124
- **Salve Regina University Counseling Services** | 401-341-2919
- **The University of Rhode Island Counseling Services** | 401-874-2288

### ***Other Resources***

- **Butler Hospital | Behavioral Health & Psychiatric Care In Rhode Island** o <https://www.butler.org/>
- **Mental Health & Substance Use Treatment | The Providence Center** o <https://www.providencecenter.org/>
- **Psychology Today** o <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us>
- **Rhode Island Office of the Mental Health Advocate Hotline** o 401-462-2003
- **Thrive Behavioral Health Inc.** o <https://www.thrivebhri.org/>