

# **A strengths-based qualitative exploration of academic motivation strategies among lower-income Black college women attending PWIs**

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*The present study explored motivating factors and sources of interpersonal and institutional support related to the academic persistence and success of self-identified lower-income Black women attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Data were drawn from interviews with a sample of 12 Black undergraduate women. Our analyses suggest that participants: (1) drew on positive academic experiences within and outside the classroom; (2) focused on short-term goals and long-term ambitions of upward social mobility and career success; and (3) considered academic persistence a form of resistance against deficit-based narratives of Black womanhood. Authors discuss implications for higher education policies and practices related to Black women's academic success.*

**Keywords:** Black women, academic motivation, identity development

## **Introduction**

Historically, colleges in America were primarily accessible to upper class, White male students, but the rising demand for educational equity and inclusion in institutional policies and practices has contributed to the increased presence and power of Black women in higher education. In general, Black women have demonstrated extraordinary resilience as college students, outpacing other groups of women in college enrollment (McDaniel et al., 2011) and more than doubling their college participation since the 1970's (NCES, 2019). Extending prior research, the present study considers how lower-income Black women, who occupy multiple societally marginalized statuses, overcome interpersonal and institutional challenges that threaten their academic achievement and persistence (Saenz et al., 2007). This article begins with a

general review of Black undergraduate women's experiences at predominantly white institutions (PWIs), followed by a specific discussion of how race, gender, and social class status may inform Black women's navigation of higher education contexts.

### **Centering Black Women's Experiences at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)**

In part, scholarship overlooks or simplifies the experiences of Black college women, as research tends to aggregate Black college students as a homogenous group or compare Black women's experiences to that of women from other racial/ethnic groups (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Lower-income Black women at PWIs have distinct experiences at the intersection of race, gender, and social class status (Smith, 2008), but most prior work has focused on race-based experiences of exclusion among Black women at PWIs. For example, Hannon and colleagues (2016) identified unique interpersonal dynamics related to participants' status as Black women at their university, such as existing in multiple worlds (i.e., primarily Black social situations and White academic situations) and a heightened awareness of being the only Black person in their immediate surroundings. The women discussed how the bifurcation of their academic and social experiences and the additional stressors of tokenism (i.e., being one of the only Black women in most classes and campus organizations) provided significant roadblocks to their college adjustment, engagement, and completion.

They and other scholars highlight the academic difficulties that Black women encounter at PWIs, such as campus-wide marginalization, negative classroom experiences, and underdeveloped support systems (Borum & Walker, 2012; Lewis et al., 2013; Ong et al., 2011). While this work underscores the challenges that Black women encounter due to racism (and sometimes sexism), there is less research on how Black women navigate challenges related to social class (e.g., Smith, 2008) and maintain academic motivation. Scholarship on social class status among college students tends to highlight how having less knowledge on leveraging resources, power, and mentoring, disadvantages lower income or first-generation students' opportunities to thrive in college (Gray et al., 2018); but less of this work addresses how individuals with structurally marginalized communities achieve college success.

### **Highlighting the Identity-Based Resilience of Black Undergraduate Women**

In light of this, the present study considers the extent to which Black women draw on their social identity beliefs – namely race, gender, and social class – as motivational resources. Motivation research examines how individuals' thoughts and attitudes directly and indirectly relate to their actions and behaviors, and scholars have long examined the mechanisms and developmental processes that support learning, achievement, and academic success among students (Chavous, 2003). Much of the early motivation work with Black students used deficit-based theories that focused on performance achievement gaps (Griffin, 2006), but a growing preponderance of research links Black students' racial identity beliefs with their academic strengths and educational attainment goals (Bentley-Edwards et al., 2016; Leath et al., 2019).

In addition, scholars have indicated that Black women's college persistence is attributable to individual factors such as a strong sense of academic self-efficacy and a positive academic self-concept, as well as institutional supports like multicultural centers and faculty mentors

(Dortch, 2016; Winkle-Wagner, 2009b). For Black women, however, a primary focus on racial identity obfuscates their unique experiences at the intersection of other visible social identities, like gender, as well as other less visible social identities, like social class status (Crenshaw, 1991; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Missing from this work is a centering of Black women's college experiences that highlights how race, gender, and social class directly map onto their experiences in ways that promote academic motivation.

In a study with Black high school girls, Marsh (2010) examined the extent to which lower-income high-achieving Black girls integrated their race and class identity beliefs into their experiences as students to maintain high academic performance. Findings indicated that the adolescent girls viewed themselves as part of a larger collective struggle within the Black community, and planned to use their educational success as a route to upward social mobility. In particular, they drew upon their connectedness to their racial group to navigate less racially diverse school settings, and discussed how possessing a strong racial awareness helped them remain grounded and motivated. While this study involved Black girls in high school, the author suggested that future research should examine how high-achieving, first-generation Black women in other schooling contexts, like PWIs, negotiate academic success. Thus, in the present study we considered how lower-income Black women are resilient in response to academic challenges and develop positive student identities. We were particularly interested in exploring how Black undergraduate women negotiated racialized, gendered, and class-related power imbalances, in ways that affirmed their sense of academic agency.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Participants for the current study were a subsample from the longitudinal, multi-site, mixed methods College Academic and Social Identities Study (PI: Dr. Tabbye Chavous). The overall sample included 2,074 multiracial students ( $n = 791$ , 38% Black/African American) from five large, selective predominantly White universities in the Midwest. We used a purposive sampling design to recruit interview participants who had completed multiple waves of diary and annual data to allow for more comprehensive analytic techniques in the future. We attained 32 interviewees who were diverse in terms of gender (23 women and nine men), social class status (lower to upper middle class), year in school (2nd to 5th years), and discipline (STEM, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Business, Education, etc.).

For the current study, 12 Black women met the criteria for lower-income status based on their responses to the close-ended pre-interview question, "If you had to describe your social class background, you would describe it as...." Response options ranged from "poor" to "upper class." In order to focus on the experiences of women from lower-income backgrounds, we included participants who self-identified as the three lower social class statuses (i.e., poor, working class, and lower middle class). This classification of "lower-income" corresponds to the previous quantitative data we collected for these women in which the best estimates of their household's total income was below \$45K, a household income that would qualify these students

for federal financial aid at their respective institutions (U.S Department of Education, 2017). All participant names and locations are pseudonyms.

### **Procedures**

After interviewer training and participant recruitment, interviews were conducted from April to October 2015. These semi-structured interviews were conducted by a single member of our research lab team, which consisted of seven Black/African American women and one biracial Puerto Rican/Black Latinx woman. We conducted interviews in a variety of campus settings (e.g., conference rooms and lab offices) that were selected for convenience and privacy. Each interview ranged from 45-90 minutes, with an average interview length of 75 minutes. Participants were compensated \$60 for their interview participation.

The interview protocol centered three major themes: (1) student's university choice and their academic and social experiences; (2) the significance of students' social identities (i.e., race, class, and gender) in their college experiences; and (3) students' perceptions of their overall university experiences and advice to incoming students. Interviewees were asked about the obstacles they had experienced (e.g., "what are or have been the biggest obstacles for you as a university student?") and the sources of motivational support they used to counter those challenges (e.g., "what are or have been the biggest motivators for you to persist at your university?").

The semi-structured format allowed interviewers the flexibility to probe interviewees on an experience in a conversational format. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by professional transcription services. The original interviewer reviewed the transcripts by listening to the audio recording and checking for grammatical errors and semantic clarity. After initial review, an additional team member reviewed the transcript before uploading final versions into DEDOOSE v. 4.12 software for analysis.

### **Coding of Narrative Data**

We integrated content and thematic analytic approaches to foreground how participants described and gave meaning to their social and psychological experiences. The integration of explicit (content) and latent (thematic) meanings allowed us to explore how participants conceptualized and maintained academic motivation with regard to their social status as lower-income Black women (Tillman, 2002). We used an open coding process, in which a team of four Black women conducted a line-by-line reading of all 12 transcripts and noted recurring ideas. In line with Miles et al.'s (2014), recommendation regarding the need for inter-subjectivity as a group, we discussed the transcripts and, through consensus, identified the portions of text from the interviews that addressed the research question. The four coding members identified an initial list of 15 thematic coding categories.

To assess coding scheme reliability, two undergraduate students (a Black woman and a White woman in their 2<sup>nd</sup> year) read original transcripts and met with the lead author in several training sessions over an 8-week period. In each session, we discussed the meaning of each coding category, connections between the categories, and the guidelines for determining when a response would or would not be coded as an exemplar of a theme. Meaningful text segments,

generally phrases, from the verbatim transcripts were used as the units of analysis in the coding of the data. To represent the presence and absence of each theme and to adjust for the tendency of some individuals to repeat ideas and phrases, only the presence or absence of a theme was recorded for each speaker. As these discussions progressed, thematic categories were refined to capture the distinct meanings and ideas represented in the Black women's responses. To ensure parsimony while capturing the richness of participants' responses, redundant categories were combined, resulting in 11 final coding categories: institutional support, faculty and mentor support, peer support, family support, financial sources of support, personal resilience, defying negative stereotypes, serving as a positive role model, goals and aspirations, upward social mobility, and motivational experiences.

Once this final list was constructed, the three coders tested the reliability of the coding scheme. Narrative samples were randomly selected from three interviews to establish the reliability of the coding scheme. Following Miles et al. (2014), reliability was calculated using the formula: Interrater Reliability (IR) = Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement) at three time points in the coding process. The first point of assessment occurred at the start of the coding process and established good reliability of the coding scheme ( $IR_1 = .81$ ). After the reliability of the coding scheme was established, each coder independently coded a common set of narrative passages from the first transcript and then a check assured there was no shifts in the coding practices of the three coders ( $IR_2 = .85$ ). At the end of the coding period, we conducted a final reliability test ( $IR_3 = .81$ ).

## Results

In what ways do Black women's social identities (e.g., race, gender, and social class) inform their pathways of academic motivation and resilience? The present study highlighted three themes on the strategies that lower-income Black college women used to maintain academic persistence: (1) *appreciating motivational academic experiences*, (2) *attaining future goals and aspirations*, and (3) *serving as positive representations of Black womanhood*.

### Theme One: Appreciating Motivational Academic Experiences

According to all 12 women, receiving a high grade after working diligently in a class, getting to know a faculty member well, or being commended for their ideas in class boosted their motivation and sense of belonging in the university context. Participants also discussed how their positive academic experiences were linked to their status as a racially minoritized student on a predominantly White campus. For instance, Kaedyn, a student who received an Urban Educator's scholarship for future teachers, voiced:

I know people who have not had professors of color. I've had the experience of having a few already, and so that's nice. I like being in the program and I've made a conscious choice to pick classes that have to do with that [referring to urban education and teaching racial minority students]. That's been very helpful for me and some of the classes have empowered me to talk about certain things.

According to Kaedyn, the opportunity to have faculty of color was a positive experience in her program, and in some cases, influenced the courses pursued. She noted that other students have not had professors of color, which came up as an academic challenge for two other women in the study. Kaedyn suggested that as a Black woman in majority White classes, having faculty of color to discuss race-related topics supported her academic motivation. Half of the women in the sample revealed seeking out courses in their major that were taught by Black faculty, enrolling in courses that explicitly related to Black culture, or being pleasantly surprised after enrolling in a class that had more than one Black student. Moreover, six women (50%) discussed the importance of faculty who discussed current events, highlighting relevant racial and social class inequities. For instance, Shantice recalled:

I think my academic experiences have been great here. I'm in a course right now that is on American pluralism and we studied the LA riots and Chinese exclusion and Cherokee heritage. As we were focusing on the LA riots, the Baltimore uprising happened and we got to take everything that we've learned about that, and apply it to what's happening currently. That was so academically valuable to me because it proved that what I'm learning is applicable today and it's something that I really care about.

Shantice's example demonstrated the importance of cultivating authentic learning opportunities for learners that center their lived experiences. For Black women in the United States (U.S.), this may include examinations of race, power, and privilege. She suggested that this impromptu discussion of the Baltimore uprising helped her connect course material with contemporary events and strengthened her motivation in the class. In line with this, several of the women discussed how prior experiences outside the classroom informed their academic decisions once they arrived to college. Nine women (75%) suggested that pre-college experiences played a key role in their current academic pathway. For example, Zelda stated:

I used to ride the short yellow bus with my mom, and I saw how they [special education students] were treated. I'm like, "My goodness, I don't want them to be treated like that." I thought as a teacher in the special education classroom, I would be able to save them from the treatment they were going through.

Zelda's experiences riding the special education bus with her mom influenced her desire to pursue an education major. More importantly, her reflection suggested that this experience informed her desire to effect positive change in the lives of kids in the future. Two other women mentioned that they chose their current major because they wanted to go back and help their predominantly Black communities or advocate for societal change on issues such as education reform, poverty, and immigration rights. The women's narratives suggested that their civic engagement supported their academic persistence as lower-income young Black women, in part, as a way to challenge structural inequalities that affected their home communities.

Finally, four women (33%) pointed out that extracurricular activities, organizations, and programs in college led them to their current major. For example, Dominique, a nursing and

psychology major from a working-class background, pointed to the important role of a volunteer organization headed by an older, retired Black nurse. She commented:

Socially and academically, I feel like it gives me a little boost in confidence, saying, “Hey, you—like you can do it. They—you can do it. They did it. You got it. They struggled, too. You got it.” You know just having support, and not fake support, you know? Like, people that actually get it.

Dominique noted that as a Black woman in nursing, she was often the only student of color in her classes. She noted, too, that nursing faculty often showed favoritism to male students, “fawning over them since they’re the only one.” She highlighted the inherent hypocrisy in this behavior since she was also a ‘minority’ in those same classes. This suggested to her that she was not the ‘right type’ of minority, and that her minority status as a Black woman was devalued by professors in her field of study compared to White male students. Still, her experiences with older, Black nurses underscored that she could complete her degree and that there were others like her in the community who supported her academic goals.

### **Theme Two: Attaining Future Goals & Aspirations**

There were three subcategories in the goals and aspirations coding theme. These included academic goals, career goals, and upward social mobility. *Academic goals* referred to objectives or ambitions that are related to success in the academic university context. Eight women held that academic goals informed their sense of academic motivation and persistence by keeping them focused on ambitions such as earning a good grade or entering a career field. Four women explicitly mentioned that they were first-generation students, or the first in their family to attend college. Their narratives suggested that the challenges that accompanied being lower-income were intensified by the pressure they felt to succeed academically as a first-generation student. For instance, Raven shared:

Yeah, as a poor student, I have to like bend over backwards to try and make [ends] meet. I have full scholarships and I also work as an RA so I have my meal plan and dorm paid off, so that’s all good. I also work a job in the dining hall just so I can have extra money to save up and just to have things that make me comfortable. I work a lot harder than other people. I’m also a first-generation college student. That keeps me motivated to do well because I want to set the bar for my other family members who are younger than me and want to go to school, but don’t have the means or the motivation to do so.

Raven’s excerpt and the other women’s narratives suggested that their success in college was interconnected to their families’ dreams for their futures as Black female professionals. Still, the women recognized that their first-generation status complicated how well they were able to navigate their surrounding institutional environments in that they could not rely on familial support for academic guidance or financial support. One participant, Alisa, said:

The university could really do better to help us figure out what the school has to offer. I can’t call my mom or my dad and ask them because they don’t know.

As much as they may want to help, they never went to college, so I have to figure this stuff out for myself. I know I miss things, and I'm not the only one.

Eight of the women (67%) discussed how long-term career goals influenced their academic motivation within the university context. *Career goals* referred to examples of students making academic decisions that would support later occupational success, which included involvement in training programs (i.e., summer job in field of study, research opportunity). Four participants related their career goals to their identity as Black women, focusing on their underrepresentation in the field and others' perceptions. Yvette described:

I chose chemical engineering because I love to look at the back of labels on like grocery store things and just looking at ingredients. I wanted to become a chemical engineer to be able to make products and consumer goods that I knew were safe, healthy, like—good quality. So I chose chemical engineering to have more control over what I want to do. And, when I told my mom, she was like, “Of course, be a chemical engineer. The world loves a Black chemical engineer.”

In her description, Yvette revealed that she chose engineering so that she could have more control over her labor, and because she believed that the underrepresentation of racial minority women in STEM fields would lead to ample job opportunities. The women also connected their desires to effect change in their future career directly to their current academic decisions. Dominique, the only Black nursing student in her program, reported that:

Even when I do become a nurse, I'm going back to my home city to serve the community. People wanna say, “Oh wow, you're gonna get out, you know, get out of the ghetto.” And I say, “No, I'm gonna go help the ghetto.”

Although being tokenized in the university context presented challenges for some of the women (i.e., being characterized as students who ‘got out’ of the ghetto or being the only Black student in a program), this experience also often reminded the women that they could help their home communities in their future career paths. This idea of community service and uplift was prominent among women pursuing education or health-related careers. For example, Charlotte, a STEM-intended major and a Women's Studies minor, noted:

I want to be an obstetrician and I feel like Women's Studies deals with things that affect women and trying to make life better for various groups that aren't as privileged. When you're a doctor, you deal with all kinds of people – people who have lots of money and people who don't really have any money. And instead of me lumping everybody together – like, you're all just pregnant women – I'll have a sense of this stuff. So I decided to pick a minor that actually matters to me, because you can major in anything and go to medical school. I felt like it will help me be more conscious in my career.



While Charlotte did not mention this, some participants' ( $n = 5$ , 42%) dialogues on choosing a major centered on potential career wealth or staying away from majors that did not promise future financial security. Six women suggested that they made academic major choices based on the desire to make more money than their parents, a form of upward social mobility.

*Upward social mobility motivation* referred to women making academic decisions based on the desire to secure financial wealth or avoid financial uncertainty in their future careers. Given that all the women were from lower-income backgrounds, this thematic prevalence suggests that attaining a college degree was tied to career and financial security. College set the stage for upward social mobility in ways that more socioeconomically privileged students did not have to think about. Tia, an Interdisciplinary Studies major, stated:

My biggest motivation is not to not be like my parents, but when I was growing up, we did struggle, and I just don't want that for my children. I wanna have a career before my kids are born. I wanna be successful, so my biggest motivator is that, my future children.

Similarly, Zelda, an education and math major, stated:

I have a passion for dancing, but I came from a household where I heard, "Arts is not gonna get you a job, so you need to declare a major that you're gonna be able to come out and get a job in." Then no one wants to be teachers anymore, so it's like I knew that I will have a job in teaching versus everyone wants to be a nurse now, and everyone wants to be an engineer now.

For many of these women, family played an integral role in thinking about their career pathways; their narratives suggest that their family's lower-income status informed the socialization they received around higher education as a route to upward social mobility.

### **Theme Three: Serving as Positive Representations of Black Womanhood**

Within the third theme, participants discussed how they were motivated to excel academically to counter negative stereotypes about Black women. The negative stereotypes highlighted how Black women's body language, tone, and intellectual ability are often called into question in academic spaces. Our analyses also revealed how these stereotype-based experiences were often classist in nature. For instance, Yvette recalled:

I tried joining the women in engineering group on campus. I thought we'd have a common thread – like we're all girls here. We should be able to have good dialogue and talk about our experiences as engineers and things like that. But I felt like that wasn't enough for me to have genuine friends in SWE [Society for Women Engineers]. One of my needs was being met as a woman, but the other need as an African-American seemed greater. It didn't even matter that I was a girl. They were still treating me like, "Oh, my gosh. She may be ratchet or she used this or she's not from the same place as me," type of thing. It wasn't enough for me to be an engineer and a woman in that group.

Women's reflections under this theme included feeling pressure to be a "model representative" of their racial group and noted instances of them joining organizations or participating in activities to provide same-race/gender models for younger students. Five of the women discussed being very aware of the predominantly White academic settings that surrounded them and feeling as though someone was always watching their actions and behaviors. Yevette highlighted how she feels singled out in many classroom spaces:

I feel like being an African American on campus, you have to not only prove academically that you are worthy, but also that you are a person that people can respect. I feel as though I have to work harder. I feel like I need to be a model Black student, instead of just being Yevette in the classroom.

Describing what it felt like to encounter judgement in the classroom, Yevette emphasized how stress arose from the ambiguity of wrestling with whether others were truly "watching her" or if it was something she had internalized because she was the only Black student in her courses. Her narrative highlighted that while this constant feeling of being on-guard may push her to be a "model Black student," it also took a negative toll on her mental health. Four participants mentioned how they focused more on setting a positive example for younger Black girls, rather than stereotyping by White faculty and peers. Eyana stated:

I almost feel like a little bit like I have to do something here, I have to be successful here, just to represent for Black women because if I don't, then they'll continue to be labeled as ghetto, living in the hood, not speaking proper. It'll be a lot of negative stereotypes and news and stuff. I feel like somewhat I'm not only trying to graduate and find a good job and have a successful life for myself, but also to make a statement for more Black girls.

The desire to serve as a model for younger Black girls was common in many of the women's narratives. In much the same way that these women connected their family's dreams for them to their personal ambition, they also felt a strong sense of connection to the next generation of Black girls. Briona stated:

I'm setting the example for myself, but also in theory. I'm sure people could make opinions about other, uh, my identities from that, so I try to, you know – it's, it's always something that's very evident. Like, it's always, it's always there. I show an example for younger Black girls – to show them, "I did this. This is something you can do."

### **Discussion**

What do lower-income Black college women's narratives reveal about the ways they draw on their social identities (e.g., race, gender, and social class) to maintain academic motivation and persistence? We found that women's persistence involved similar factors and processes to that of other college students (i.e., faculty support, earning good grades, extracurricular opportunities, strong peer relationships, and family encouragement). However, the narratives highlighted how their experiences were also rooted in the intersection of being Black, female, and lower-income. Below, we review the three main coding categories and

expand on how the current study builds on and extends previous work. In addition, we provide specific recommendations for institutions of higher education aimed towards improving the academic adjustment and overall wellbeing of Black college women attending PWIs.

### **Appreciating Motivational Academic Experiences**

In general, motivation research suggests that positive academic experiences such as close professor-student relationships, good grades, and meaningful learning experiences contribute to a stronger sense of academic engagement among college students (Griffin et al., 2010; McGee et al., 2016). This is consistent with our finding that women identified positive academic experiences in and outside of the classroom as motivating and affirming. However, some participants intentionally sought more classroom experiences and extracurricular activities that integrated their social identities as Black women into their academic identities as students. For example, a few women conveyed their excitement about enrolling in courses that were instructed by Black faculty, and participating in organizations that were directed by Black personnel. These experiences reminded them that there were others “like them” who had succeeded in predominantly White academic fields or career paths, thus reinforcing the idea that they could be successful (Griffin, 2013). For others, these courses allowed them to learn about race-related issues without being marginalized as the token Black student in the room.

The women indicated that having the opportunity to be in a course with a Black instructor or with other Black students was a beneficial respite from their usual experiences with predominantly White instructors and peers. Their narratives demonstrate that higher education institutions must maintain or strengthen their efforts to recruit and retain Black faculty members (Scott, 2019). Institutions should also provide more financial institutional support for organizations that center the holistic success of Black students, such as Africana and Black Studies Departments and Black Student Centers. Finally, PWIs must make genuine and sustained efforts to recruit, admit, and retain Black college women in critical masses to allow for their engagement with other Black women who vary in their racial/ethnic, social class, and other identity backgrounds. Indeed, research demonstrates how intraracial friendships offer a critical form of academic and social support for Black women (e.g., Ford & Malaney, 2012).

We also gained insight into how these Black women drew on social support from family members to bolster their resolve to seek out academic help and to celebrate their achievements. Although a few of the first-generation women mentioned that it was difficult to try and explain their academic experiences with their families, all of the women asserted that they regularly called parents, siblings, or cousins to discuss issues they ran into with faculty, peers, or college administrators. These women reported receiving supportive messages from their families that centered on advocating for themselves, trusting in their academic abilities, and remembering that their family believed in their ability to graduate.

In keeping with the conclusions of Griffin (2006), these women tacitly translated the type of support their families were able to offer into sources of academic motivation, again highlighting how agentic our participants were in drawing on culture and community in their efforts to remain persistent in the face of academic challenges. Participants wanted to make their

family proud, and described a sense of pride in being able to tell their parents or other family about how well they were doing in college. They detailed how they were determined to attain a degree from their institution regardless of academic obstacles because they felt their families were depending on them to set a positive example for younger siblings. The women articulated a clear understanding of the challenges of attending a PWI, but also the advantages a degree from such an institution would confer after graduation. For the lower-income Black women in our study, earning their undergraduate degree was an integral step towards community uplift.

### **Attaining Upward Social Mobility**

Participants described a range of academic barriers that added stress to their college experiences (i.e., being the only Black student in a department, lack of knowledge about navigating college life, and very few same-race faculty). Women also mentioned that professors and peers questioned their academic abilities, overlooked their contributions in class, and enacted other forms of exclusion and isolation that made them feel as though they needed to ‘prove their academic worth.’ While these experiences have been documented in prior higher education research on the race-related challenges related to the academic adjustment of Black students (Fischer, 2007; Winkle-Wagner, 2019), less work has interrogated social class exclusion. Our analyses highlighted how these experiences are often classed in nature, for instance, with women describing encounters based in negative race/class stereotypes of ‘ghetto’ or ‘ratchet.’

As another example of social class exclusion, one woman described an instance where a financial aid counselor informed her that she might be academically prepared for college, but not a good ‘financial fit’; her social class status threatened her ability to remain in school if she was unable to access institutional resources. For many of the women, their narratives highlighted challenges related to socioeconomic background, first-generation status, and academic support. While for some, it involved lack of adequate financial support; for others, it concerned how their families were unable to provide helpful academic advice or assistance, a theme in prior literature on lower-income college students (Smith, 2008). The women revealed several ways that they tried to circumnavigate these challenges, such as soliciting assistance from the financial aid office, seeking employment, and using free academic resources at their university to manage demanding coursework. Although the women qualified for financial assistance, the need to pursue more financial support to maintain their academic enrollment reflected an additional burden that institutions should do more to redress.

One woman, an International Studies major with future United Nations career goals, mentioned that she was unable to pursue study abroad because she needed the money from her campus job to help pay for a mandatory dining plan and additional family expenses. By comparison, another young woman mentioned how fortunate she felt that her volunteerism later translated into a job that would be relevant work experience for her future career field; however, this type of opportunity could be facilitated through more formal networks by universities (i.e., paid field placement for education majors). The luxury of being able to accept unpaid internships or volunteer work privileges the socioeconomic status of higher-income students, who are less likely to be concerned with living paycheck to paycheck to make ends meet or providing

financial support for family members at home (Aries & Seider, 2005). In all, the women's lower-income backgrounds presented frequent challenges for them while they were in school, but the possibility of future financial security, promoted academic persistence.

### **Serving as Positive Representations of Black Womanhood**

Finally, our study participants discussed the importance of setting a positive example for younger Black girls or family members, and further, considered their academic success one way to counter negative stereotypes of Black people broadly, and Black women, more specifically. The women described how pre-college experiences informed their college major choice and were often tied to the goal of effecting positive change in their home communities through their future occupation. They recalled the challenges they witnessed in their lower-income neighborhoods (i.e., fewer school resources or inequitable access to healthcare), and how they planned to intercede as educators or health professionals. One such example is a student's discussion of how she chose a nursing career path so that she could return to her predominantly Black, lesser-resourced community and help patients. Bentley-Edwards and colleagues (2016) recently suggested that a desire to engage in community-based change may be a prominent source of academic motivation, and that we need a better understanding of the ways in which Black students' backgrounds inform their career aspirations. A prime concern for some women was that they would be unable to find a career that satisfied their desire to effect positive change and offered financial stability.

Overall, the women in our sample acknowledged that within their campus environment, they felt an omnipresent pressure to monitor their expressions, behaviors, and actions to disprove negative racial and/or gendered racial stereotypes. For example, they talked about controlling their verbal responses in class to avoid being construed as the 'loud, angry Black woman,' or using 'proper English' to avoid stereotypes of being ghetto and inarticulate (Hannon et al., 2016; Phelps-Ward et al., 2017). They indicated that although they attended large universities with more than 30,000 students, there were only a few hundred Black students in any given class of freshman. Oftentimes, this resulted in them being the only Black student in their courses, which made them feel as though they had to serve as a model representative of their racial group to counter prejudiced viewpoints of non-Black peers and faculty. Although the desire to refute negative stereotypes contributed to their academic persistence, the examples also suggest that such vigilance inhibited their academic curiosity and willingness to make mistakes in class in fear of seeming less intelligent (Donovan et al., 2012).

### **Implications for the Education of Black Women and Girls**

The current investigation enhances our understanding of variation in how lower-income Black women utilized personal meaning making processes around their race, gender, and social class identities to maintain and promote academic engagement in the university context. Yet, what are the practical implications regarding how institutional stakeholders can improve their experiences in college? First, our findings demonstrate that young Black women enter college with a wide array of beliefs based in a diverse range of experiences – there is no singular "Black woman experience" that can encompass the range of beliefs and perspectives within this

community (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Yet, our analyses suggest that the salience of Black women's race, gender, and social class identities are spotlighted within a PWI context in ways that "reduce" them to these social identities in how others interact with them. Their narratives also highlighted how lower-income Black women agentically navigate experiences of isolation and marginality in PWI settings by cultivating interpersonal and institutional support systems that help foster their success (Domingue, 2015; Robinson et al., 2013; Shahid et al., 2018).

Second, while the women were utilizing every resource at their disposal (i.e., personal resolve, financial aid, family support, etc.) to work their way through college, they often felt at the margins of institutional support. While such resilience is an important skill for all college students, this may be particularly challenging for students from historically marginalized communities who encounter an unreceptive and hostile campus. Universities and colleges could implement more comprehensive financial aid programs that effectively address the needs of lower-income students in ways that allow them to focus more on academic endeavors. This should span from general financial aid for tuition and room and board, to specific forms of scholarship or grant support that allow lower-income students to maximize their collegiate experience (e.g., study abroad or unpaid internships). Institutions could also develop family partnership programs that center on the needs of first-generation Black women, as well as formal mentoring networks with individuals who share common class-based experiences.

Finally, universities could provide more support for formal and informal social groups for Black college women to help create counterspaces that may ease feelings of isolation and encourage a sense of community and interpersonal connection (Hannon et al., 2016; Miles et al., 2011; Winkle-Wagner, 2019). The women's narratives suggested that they thrive in environments that emphasize their academic strengths and offer opportunities for personal and professional growth. In closing, higher education institutions must intentionally build campus supports for underrepresented groups, and these efforts should involve (but not solely rely on) the help and guidance of the students they are designed to serve. In particular, our findings lend insight into the transgressive knowledge of lower-income Black women, which (when valued) may help administrators and faculty address the detrimental effects of racism, sexism, and classism that permeate many PWI settings.

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## Appendix

**Table 1**

*Demographic Summary of Participants (n = 12)*

Name	Year in College	College	Major	Social Class Status
Charlotte	2 <sup>nd</sup>	A	STEM-Undeclared	Poor
Raven	3 <sup>rd</sup>	A	Foreign Studies	Poor
Dominique	3 <sup>rd</sup>	A	Nursing & Psychology	Working Class
Latoya	3 <sup>rd</sup>	A	Sociology	Working Class
Zelda	2 <sup>nd</sup>	B	Education & Math	Working Class
Alisa	2 <sup>nd</sup>	B	Psychology	Lower Middle Class
Briona	2 <sup>nd</sup>	B	Mathematics & Psychology	Working Class
Shantice	2 <sup>nd</sup>	B	Family Studies	Working Class
Tia	3 <sup>rd</sup>	B	Interdisciplinary Studies	Working Class
Yvette	3 <sup>rd</sup>	B	Biomedical Sciences	Working Class
Kaedyn	3 <sup>rd</sup>	B	Special Education	Working Class
Eyana	3 <sup>rd</sup>	B	Media Studies	Lower Middle Class

Note. We used pseudonyms throughout the document.