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## African American And First-Generation Students' Perceptions Of And Experiences With An Academic Cohort

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AFRICAN AMERICAN AND FIRST-GENERATION  
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF AND EXPERIENCES WITH  
AN ACADEMIC COHORT

A Dissertation  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Education  
in the School of Education  
The University of Mississippi

by

KIM BARNES and SOVENT TAYLOR

May 11, 2018



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## ABSTRACT

Underrepresented student populations are faced with numerous barriers and are often overlooked on many college campuses. The aim of this research was to better understand academic cohorts and if they help reduce some of the barriers faced by African American and first-generation students which can ultimately affect retention and persistence to graduation. In order to gather this information, interviews and surveys were conducted with students once enrolled in the Foundations for Academic Success Track (FASTrack) program at the University of Mississippi. Results from the interviews and surveys indicate that while the FASTrack program seemed to support successful social transitions for these underrepresented student populations at the University of Mississippi. The FASTrack academic cohort program was severely lacking in assisting students with their academic integration. From our limited research, we infer that the FASTrack program successfully broke down many of the barriers faced by underrepresented students. However, there are still steps to be taken to further achieve educational equality, particularly in the academic realm for this group of underrepresented students.

## DEDICATION

### **Sovent:**

This Dissertation is dedicated to my wife Kaleshia and my children, Sovient II, and Perchelle. Kaleshia, without your continued support and encouragement, I would not have pushed through this dissertation process. To my children, Sovient and Perchelle, I love you with every piece of me and I did this for you! I want you both to know that the sky is the limit and that you should always look to achieve greatness because your potential is endless. I love you all!

### **Kim:**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to some of the most amazing, sensational people in my life – my remarkable family. I want to thank my phenomenal husband of twenty-three short years, Kevin, who always supported my crazy ideas and gave me his unconditional love and encouragement throughout our time together. To my amazingly talented daughter, Katie, you never stopped believing in me and pushing me to be a better person and I'm so proud of you. To my charmingly fabulous son, Chase, you amaze me with all your talents and charm, thank you for always making me laugh. I cannot thank my family enough for all their support, encouragement, prayers, and love during this process and the challenging storms of our lives. I would not have made it without Kevin, Katie, and Chase. I loved you yesterday. I love you today. I'll love you tomorrow and I'll love you forever.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **PROBLEM OF PRACTICE**

Student success is vital to colleges and universities and the students they serve. In an increasingly diverse world, institutions must support all student populations in order to maximize student success. Student success, as defined for this research, is retention or persistence towards a college degree. How do colleges and universities increase these metrics for underrepresented students such as African American and first-generation students? More specifically, what kind of challenges do these student populations face? Our problem of practice motivated us to better understand the efforts by colleges and universities to combat the challenges and barriers faced by African American and first-generation students. Specifically, we wanted to learn more about students' perceptions of whether participation in an academic cohort community contributed to overall student satisfaction, increased social interaction, and provided other long-term benefits?

Looking at retention of exceptional African American and Latino students, Baker and Robnett (2012) state:

The experiences of students once they enter college, particularly during the first year, are very significant in influencing their success. Some of the factors that may influence the success of racial and ethnic minority students during college are on-campus social support, off-campus ties, and the perceived college environment. (p. 326)

Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2012) echo similar challenges for African American students, stating:

The lack of academic preparation, absence of other students with similar cultural backgrounds, and financial need, coupled with the anxieties of being away from home, all contribute to freshmen students leaving school. The first year away from home and the unfamiliar settings are grueling for all college students. (p. 207)

Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, and Adkison (2011) proposed that “cohort participation enhances student feelings of relatedness, which leads to improved student motivation and educational outcomes: specifically, students’ ability to communicate effectively, think critically and analytically, and generally be better prepared to enter the workforce” (p. 854). Goldman (2012) noted that students who participated in academic cohorts are more likely to feel connected with the university and experience greater satisfaction with university life. Baker and Robnett (2012) further stressed, “social support from within the college environment appears to play a vital role in the retention of underrepresented minority college students” (p. 331).

### **Three Manuscript Model**

This research will be presented utilizing a three-manuscript format. The first manuscript will describe background information via a literature review. It will also provide contextualization for the foundations of the research. Finally, the first manuscript will explore the overarching concerns for enhancing equity, ethics, and social justice for underrepresented student populations. The second manuscript focuses on data interpretation. It will include the research question, how the research was conducted, and the findings. The third manuscript will focus on implementation and dissemination of the research discoveries. The implementation portion of the manuscript centers on implementing a plan to influence policy based on the research outcomes. The dissemination portion of the manuscript will discuss how the findings

will be shared with scholar practitioners in higher education, as well as other university stakeholders and decision makers.

The manuscripts will give a brief literature review of academic cohorts which will include an overview of the FASTrack (Foundations for Academic Success Track) cohort program at the University of Mississippi and their reported success. After presenting background on academic cohorts and the FASTrack program, our research project will be presented. The target population for interviews and surveys included students who previously participated in the FASTrack program and who were currently enrolled at the University of Mississippi. These student population groups provided valuable insight from their experiences and involvement in the FASTrack academic cohort.

## **Underrepresented Students**

### **Issues Faced by Underrepresented Students**

Today in the United States, underrepresented students face multiple and complex problems in higher education (Baker, 2013). It is important to recognize these problems in order to determine the obstacles faced by these students. Some key challenges include: affordability, accessibility, student success (both academically and socially), and time to degree completion. As previously noted, academic cohorts were implemented to combat many of these issues. Underrepresented students who are greatly impacted by these issues (and other challenges) may be classified as minority, first-generation, and/or low-income. How do higher education institutions better support underrepresented groups? How do institutions create learning environments where students' educational needs are adequately met and social injustices do not take place? Antagonistic marginalization exists when individuals are denied quality education,

because they are not allowed to participate in political, economic and social aspects of the community (Grier-Reed, Arcinue, & Inman, 2016, p. 185).

Higher education institutions should promote social justice so that students do not feel marginalized, oppressed, neglected, or discriminated against while in attendance. According to Jehangir (2009), “research has shown that first-generation, low-income college students experience both isolation and marginalization, especially during their first year of college, which impacts their long-term persistence in higher education” (p. 33). Inequalities for African American students also exist. “Throughout history, the African American experience has been immersed with social subordination, political repression, and economic exploitation. In an effort to repress these experiences, African Americans identified education as the most valuable resource for improving their standing in America” (Watkins, 1993 as cited by Johnson, 2013, p. 38). Johnson (2013) further stressed that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 both helped facilitate changes for African Americans seeking a higher education degree. If educational environments are not welcoming or encouraging equality for all students, how will higher education institutions instill behaviors of social justice and equality in those we are charged with educating? Although previous legislation has increased educational opportunities for various populations, there are still changes that need to be incorporated to provide educational equality.

In the book, *Lesson Plan*, by Bowen and McPherson (2016) the authors presented some radical proposals such as cost shifting and cost reduction that will require bold steps by higher education institutions to help modify, correct, change, and improve higher education so equality, affordability, and social/academic success can be achieved. Incorporating changes, such as making higher education more affordable for disadvantaged or underrepresented groups, can

profit not only the student, but also the university, and the economy. Minority and first-generation students need support and encouragement to help them achieve educational success. Without financial support and educational encouragement, many students would never be able to achieve a college degree. Academic cohorts can potentially be a feasible option to encourage students on their pathway to a college diploma.

Access for underrepresented or marginalized students is a pressing issue and can often be related to cost. For colleges and universities to educate the masses, education should be easily accessible to everyone who desires the social mobility that can be obtained through a college degree. “The gap between underrepresented minority students and other groups is particularly detrimental because it affects individuals’ long-term social mobility” (Carter, 2006, p. 33). Academic cohorts could save on tuition costs because they were designed to keep students on track to complete their degrees in a timely fashion. Carter (2006) stated, “specifically, for African Americans, a group with a high percentage of low-income students, all types of packages with grant aid, including loans and grants, were positively associated with persistence” (p. 36).

The cost of education places limits on a student’s ability to attend college. At public universities, like the University of Mississippi, the issues of cost stems from decreased funding from the state. When state funds decrease, tuition is increased in an attempt to make up the difference. According to an article by Doyle (2013),

In Mississippi higher education funding declined by 3.2 percent between FY 2012 and FY 2013. For FY 2014, Mississippi Governor Bryant’s budget proposal seeks an increase of 1.4 percent, which is likely to be insufficient to keep up with inflation or projected enrollments. (p. 60)

Who pays for the increase in tuition prices? In Mississippi, funding decreased for several years, but when it increased, the amount was still insufficient to cover the rising cost at each of the states' public universities which caused the cost to be passed on to the students. This was a significant hindrance to students who wanted a college education. In reference to Mississippi college institutions, Norwood (2017, p.1) stated, "Between fiscal years 2010 and 2017, state general fund appropriations have increased 17.3 percent. In that same time, state university funding has decreased 4.5 percent and the IHL system general funds decreased 7.1 percent". Every increase in college tuition could potentially deny access to students across the State of Mississippi. This is just one example of how the rising cost of education can limit access for underrepresented students.

Having access to college is not just about being able to afford it. It is also about the student being able to survive and thrive once they arrive at college. Many students enter college academically and socially underprepared which potentially limits success (Fleming, 2012). Some argue that reform cannot take place in higher education until reform takes place in the entire American educational system, as well as making improvements needed in the life circumstances of the "lower classes" in public K-12 schools (Rossides, 2004). Sadly, there is still evidence that equality in educational opportunities for America's youth are limited for students from low social economic status backgrounds and, as a result, these individuals do not receive the same education on average as students from more affluent families/neighborhoods (Myers, n.d.).

### **African American Students**

Taylor, McGowan, and Alston (2008) pointed out that many African American students may have low performance scores/records from K-12 to college because they attended poor

schools, lacked books in their homes, came from single parent families, or lived in poverty. People often blame individuals for their inadequacies. “The current zeitgeist in America is for people to take personal responsibility for everything, including their education, or to adopt an attitude of colorblindness where race is no longer an issue” (Grier-Reed, Arcinue, & Inman, 2016, p. 184). Higher education institutions should take the opposite approach and provide adequate educational opportunities for all students regardless of background to help level the playing field for disadvantaged students including African American students.

According to Fink and Hummel (2015) learning communities that are specifically designed for underserved student populations are able to deliver quality educational experiences to students of color, first-generation students, transfer students, students with disabilities, student veterans, international students, or low-income students. Learning communities that focus on first-generation, low-income, or minority populations give these demographics the extra support, additional resources, and encouragement they need to be successful in college and obtain a baccalaureate degree.

All students do not enroll in college with the same advantages. According to Grier-Reed, Arcinue, and Inman (2016),

Numerous studies (e.g., Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Davis et al., 2004; Watkins, Green, Goodson, Guidry, & Stanley, 2007) note that Black students face a variety of stressors on predominantly White campuses and face challenges such as pressure to conform, racial conflict, lack of support, institutional racism, social isolation, and inequitable treatment by university personnel. (p. 185)

Many women of color find even more difficulty pursuing a degree because of significant deficiencies in career counseling, lack of role models, not being academically prepared, and not



believing they have the ability to succeed (Johnson, 2012). These students and other underrepresented students struggle with college because they have no one at home to help them with collegiate issues such as which courses to take, the degree program in which they should enroll, what their major should be, how many hours they should take, how to get help with financial issues, where to buy textbooks, where to study, how to study, how to interact with professors/other students, to name a few.

African American male students have often been viewed as being unmotivated (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2012). Johnson (2013) noted many obstacles that African American students have to overcome according to societal perceptions, noting:

It is imperative that African Americans excel in education to disprove the myths and stereotypes (e.g., being lazy, criminal, anti-intellectual, not valuing an education) that are prevalent in society (Gray, 2001; Davis, 2004). Society needs to recognize that African Americans are intelligent, hardworking, and productive members of society, and that all citizens regardless of race or nationality should be given an equal opportunity to pursue a college degree in a welcoming and nurturing environment. Because African Americans will continue to enroll in predominantly White colleges and universities for various reasons – e.g., tuition costs, scholarships, programs of study, academic rankings, facilities – these institutions need to promote their matriculation in a manner that equals to that of their White peers by implementing retention programs that increase student satisfaction, retention, and graduation rates. (p. 49)

Baker and Robnett (2012) notated that minority students at predominately white institutions (PWI's) are more likely to feel unsatisfied and less likely to feel part of the college community. According to Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2012) “African American male students, and

other students of color, face cultural, societal, academic, and lifestyle differences from the traditional college student, all of which colleges and universities often attempt to address” (p. 208). The researchers go on to add that the cultural differences of African American male students should be taken into account in order to retain this student population on campus (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2012).

In order to improve retention, PWI’s (predominantly white institutions) should evaluate and study obstacles faced by African American students (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2012) both academic and social. Ethnic and racial minorities at PWIs often feel invisible and discriminated against by other college students (Baker & Robnett, 2012). “Results indicated that African-American students who enrolled at PWIs experienced lower academic achievement because they had lower academic aspirations, and therefore, were doubtful about their choice to complete their college undergraduate degree program” (Brooks, Jones, & Burt, 2012, p. 208). Grier-Reed, Arcinue, and Inman (2016) noted there are numerous explanations for the achievement gap and they can be related to issues such as inadequate early childhood preparation, health disparities, poor housing, unequal school funding, linguistic differences, biases, prejudices in teaching practices, absence of role models, and racism and classism.

All students should be able to receive counseling, guidance, encouragement, and support at their institutions of higher learning. “A comprehensive retention program would need to involve academic advising, tutoring, career counseling, financial support, and health care addressing the multiple factors that contribute to the achievement gap” (Grier-Reed, Arcinue, & Inman, 2016, p. 189). Therefore, offering environments such as learning communities which are specifically designed for targeted groups like African American students, universities can help students be successful by helping them adjust to college, have higher grade point averages, and

complete degrees (Johnson, 2012). Manuscript Two will take an in-depth look at whether students' perceptions of an academic cohort provided successful benefits for underrepresented student populations.

### **First-Generation Students**

There are many definitions of first-generation students. According to the Higher Education Opportunity Act (2008), the following definition is used:

Federal law defines first generation status as: an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree.

In order to understand why first-generation college students are denied access, one must first understand who they are. "One of the greatest challenges facing first-generation students in pursuit of a college education is their position on the margin of two cultures – that of their friends and family and that of their college community (London, 1992 as cited by Hsiao, 1992, p. 2). In 2014, first-generation college students accounted for about one quarter of traditional-aged college attendees, tended to be from lower income households, and were more likely to represent an ethnic minority than their peers (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). However, that number has increased in recent years. For the purpose of this research, first-generation students shall be defined as a student in which neither parent obtained a degree from a four-year institution. Hand and Payne (2008) stated that, "getting students, especially first-generation students, to enroll in college is difficult, and to keep them in college, the battle continues" (p. 4). First-generation students typically have lower college entrance scores than their peers, set smaller academic goals, must work while taking classes, face difficulty transitioning into college, take remedial

courses, require financial assistance, and have a lower GPA (grade point averages) at the end of their first year of college (Arnold & Barratt, 2015).

As the first in their families to attend college, first-generation college students often experience a discrepancy between the opportunities available to them and those available to their non-college educated family members which can elicit family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). This issue can cause many first-generation college students to be denied a college education. Many of these students will leave because they feel alienated from their family because of the guilt. “One of the most critical issues facing first-generation college students is that of their parent’s lack of knowledge and understanding about what it will take for students to succeed” (Peabody, Hutchens, Lewis, & Deffendall, 2011, p. 9). Other first-generation students will leave because of the lack of a support system at home. Their family never went to college; therefore, they have no way to get answers to many of the typical questions asked by most college students (Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017). This can lead to discouragement, which can lead to poor grades that can cause these students to lose access because they do not persist in college. Housel (2012) noted,

Regardless of whether first generation students are racial or ethnic minority students or not, studies show FGS often lack reading, writing and oral communication skills at the levels of the children of college graduates, which frequently lead to poor retention rates. (p. 2).

Unfortunately, first-generation students are often overlooked on most college campuses and tend to encounter more professional, financial, academic, cultural, and emotional problems than other student populations (Housel, 2012). It is ironic first-generation students are overlooked considering this student population demonstrates lower graduation rates. “Although

first-generation college students are less likely to persist and graduate, surprisingly little is known about their college experiences and the ways those experiences compare to the experiences of students who have college-educated parents” (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Arnold and Barratt (2015) stated that “as retention and graduation become paramount measures of institutional success, the presence of any group with historically low retention and graduation rates presents a challenge to campus administrators” (p. 183). Peabody, Hutchens, Lewis, and Deffendall (2011) mentioned several promising practices to help with student retention of first-generation students which included: peer mentoring, peer-counseling, peer-tutoring, faculty mentoring, freshman seminar courses, summer bridge programs, career programming sessions, living learning communities, parental programs, and student organizations.

### **Contextualization**

#### **Academic Cohorts as a Solution**

Academic cohorts have taken on many different variations since their conception and are typically modified to fit the individual needs of the institutions and the students they are serving. Many institutions structured their academic programs as academic cohorts because students in the same degree program are more likely to start and finish their academic journey together (Lei et al., 2011). Typically, students enrolled in an academic cohort take a certain amount of courses together during a set period within their academic career. The coursework often includes courses that are taken along with other students who are experiencing similar transitions. These academic courses may or may not be based on predetermined factors such as major, classification, or degree program. In addition, other students classified as low-income, minority, first-generation, honors, academically underprepared, having a disability, or other targeted groups may enroll in learning communities in order to build a community which can help

develop citizenship, create a body of learners, and engage in transformative learning experiences (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012). As noted by Fink and Hummel (2015) learning communities that are designed specifically for underserved populations can deliver quality educational experiences to first-generation students, transfer students, students of color, students with disabilities, international students, student veterans, or low-income students. These students are able to receive the extra boost, encouragement, support, and resources needed in order to be successful in college and obtain a baccalaureate degree. In addition, students who participate in learning communities typically experience benefits in their overall emotional, spiritual, social, and physical development (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012).

### **Historical View of Academic Cohorts**

Often academic cohorts are established for particular educational purposes. It is uncertain when the first true academic cohort was created. Yet, many of the first academic cohorts in the United States were modeled after the “Oxbridge” concept which combined components from European collegiate influences such as Cambridge and Oxford (Dunn & Dean, 2013). For the most part, American education was narrow-minded in terms of equal educational opportunities for those seeking an education (Myers, n.d.).

The need for academic cohorts in the United States increased after World War II. The return home from the battlefield left many soldiers without career opportunities. The lack of career training left many of the Government Issue servicemen or G.I.s with limited opportunities unless they attended college. In order to accommodate the needs of these returning soldiers, the United States government passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the G.I. Bill. The G.I. Bill offered these soldiers the opportunity to attend college at little to no cost. Many veterans took advantage of this new benefit for education or training and

enrolled at higher education institutions across the country. Institutions had to adjust to meet the needs of the new ever-changing student population, which included veterans of both genders and all ethnicities (Fink & Inkelas, 2015).

The increased enrollment of the new soldiers placed many demands on institutions of higher learning. According to Fink and Inkelas (2015), a wide range of postsecondary educational institutions were developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to serve the needs of a larger more diverse student population. At this point, colleges were no longer a place where only the elites and affluent were welcomed. All types of people with different academic and social backgrounds were now enrolling in college at a rapid pace. Were all Americans receiving a top-notch education after college enrollment numbers soared?

Years after the influx of GIs to college campuses, another new period of growth at institutions of higher learning known as “massification” began to take shape (Trow, 1999). Nearly two decades later there were more federal policy changes in American higher education which increased the demographics of minority populations and women enrolling in college which was perfectly acknowledged in the following statement by Gumpert, Iannozzi, Shaman and Zemsky (1997):

Upward social and economic mobility and overall national economic growth continued, causing a general increase in demand for higher education. Social and political changes, such as the Civil Rights and Women’s Rights Movements and expanded federal financial aid, opened access to higher education for underrepresented populations—more women, more minorities, more part-time and intermittent learners, and more students well past the traditional ages of college attendance. Expansion in enrollment also led to a sharp increase in the number of institutions, as well as a fundamentally different mix of

institutions, as the diverse needs of students became reflected in the programmatic and institutional structures of the system. (p. 2)

As more and more diverse populations began to enroll at college campuses across the country, higher education institutions needed to make modifications to their programs to better serve each unique student who enrolled at their institution. Academic cohorts are one method institutions chose to better serve the aforementioned student populations.

### **Contemporary View of Academic Cohorts**

To foster academic success for students who fall into multiple underrepresented student populations and to prevent students from leaving the university before achieving their degree, it is critical to provide nurturance, encouragement, and assistance to these individuals. In addition, colleges and universities should not assume all student populations nor each student within each population require the same type of resources and support. For example, “Assuming that all first-generation students are alike is a poor place to start” (Arnold and Barratt, 2015, p. 196). Such considerations such as providing a nurturing environment and encouragement should also be given to African American students.

Academic cohorts were designed to further academic achievements. In their early stages of development, academic cohorts were crafted in response to higher education reform (Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood & Wright-Porter, 2011). Educational reform at the collegiate level in the United States was needed because American undergraduate education was viewed as being too passive, disconnected, incoherent, and disengaged; therefore, learning communities were created after John Dewey’s model which consisted of a holistic development approach which should be applied, experiential, and connected to various societal problems (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). The Dewey model focused on how life experiences and interactions contribute to



learning. “Dewey’s deep insights into the learning process provided a powerful link in the development of today’s learning communities” (“Learning Community Foundations,” 1990, p. 16). This strategy was the premise behind the view of academic cohorts as a potential solution to help students persist in a college environment.

### **Benefits of Academic Cohorts**

There are many benefits to being a member of an academic cohort. These benefits could include positive factors for both the institution and the student. According to Lei et al. (2011) student members of a cohort built positive peer relationships, felt a sense of cohesiveness with classmates, formed social/professional networks, developed emotional ties, created academic support systems, and were retained and graduate at a more successful rate. Love (2012) noted learning communities were implemented “with the aim of improving student learning, improving students’ experiences in and out of the classroom, providing integration of ideas and disciplines to combat increasing specialization and compartmentalization of disciplines, and increasing rates of student retention and degree completion” (p. 5). Chickering (2010) stated, “So, even as late as 1987, outcomes concerning moral and ethical development, other dimensions of personal development, and civic engagement were not part of the general conversation about higher education” (p. 57).

Beachboard et al. (2011) posited educational cohorts or formal learning communities were established “to improve students’ critical thinking skills, overall learning, and ability to work in teams; to facilitate better integration of content across the curriculum; and to enhance student retention” (p. 854). Goldman (2012) noted universities experience benefits when they incorporate academic cohorts and these benefits can include “better grades, higher rates of course

completion, improved retention of students into second and third years and higher rates of graduation” (p. 1).

### **Disadvantages of Academic Cohorts**

Although there are many beneficial factors of academic cohorts, there are some disadvantages with these types of programs. One disadvantage involves previously taken academic coursework. Students who have taken prior academic courses in high school (dual enrollment) might need to repeat some college coursework dependent upon their cohort curriculum. Per Lei et al. (2011) students who participate in academic cohorts have less flexibility designing their own academic curriculum, have less interaction with non-cohort students, competition may become rampant among students, and interactions can resemble dysfunctional families. In addition, academic cohort students may not have the freedom to select their own instructors. Often college students utilize programs such as [ratemyprofessors.com](http://ratemyprofessors.com) to determine which professors are the best on campus according to other student recommendations. “There is also a difficulty in scheduling courses and keeping all cohort students in the same sequence of classes throughout the program of study” (Lei et al., 2011, p. 502).

Other disadvantages according to Beachboard et al. (2011) can include the formation of cliques, students getting in a comfort zone where they are not as proactive as they should be, excessive socializing, disruptive behavior, and students being unchallenged in the classroom. In addition, drawbacks with the instructors may take place, such as the instructor having no flexibility in the curriculum, instructors who create overly challenging curriculums, and instructors’ ongoing challenge of keeping students on the same learning schedule despite different levels of knowledge on the topic (Lei et al., 2011).

## **Goals of Academic Cohorts**

Often the goals of an academic cohort may include improving the academic skills of the participants, creating critical thinkers, developing a sense of belonging, enriching the students' understanding, and engaging students in a positive learning experience (Workman & Redington, 2015). Fink and Hummel (2015) noted inclusive learning communities can promote student success and enhance educational quality. Developmental learning outcomes might include developing effective study techniques, creating effective time management skills, learning to set meaningful goals, developing/cultivating proficient written and oral communication techniques, acquiring better note taking skills, actively participating in civic activities, enhancing critical thinking skills, creating ethical reasoning capabilities, and becoming lifelong learners.

According to Goldman (2012) "the common goal of learning communities is to improve the overall undergraduate education experience, including increasing a student's sense of intellectual and social integration with the institution" (p. 1). Many institutions establish program goals for their first-year learning communities which may include: enhancing students' sense of belonging, navigating students' transition from high school, developing skills/strategies to be a successful student, connecting students with faculty/staff/other students, minimizing anxiety, promoting positive attitudes, encouraging out-of-class engagement, helping students achieve personal and academic goals, creating supportive peer networks, and acclimating students to university culture (Goldman, 2012).

## **Student Development Influences**

One popular response to the improving student success and retention question often asked from administrators, parents, and assessors of higher education has come in the creation of academic cohorts, commonly known as learning communities.

Contextualization of the problem of practice identified was centered on the ability of academic cohorts to increase student success. Yet, rather than examining the student perspective, researchers often look only at the numbers from statistical data to tell the story of whether or not the academic cohort increased retention and graduation. In order to learn more about how colleges can improve student success and retention, and in our view to understand what works and does not work about academic cohorts, students' perspectives must be examined more closely.

The justification for the need of academic cohorts in our research was centered on Chickering's Theory of Identity Development-The Seven Vectors and Schlossberg's Transition Theory. According to Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) much of Chickering's theory evaluated interpersonal, ethical, emotional, and intellectual aspects of development. Schlossberg's Transition Theory has often been viewed as an adult development theory which provides an in-depth look at an individual's transition during a certain stage of life (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). This stage can be influenced significantly by a person's environment.

Ryan, Carlstrom, Hughey, and Harris (2011) outlined the four stages/factors of Schlossberg Transition Model as self (develop identity, motivations, and skills), support system (friends, family, significant others, or institutional community), situation (make academic transitions due to greater sense of control and hopefulness), and strategies (learn new techniques for success because of response to challenges and employ effective coping skills) and how any type of weakness or strength displayed in any of the factors can positively or negatively impact a

student's transition. In essence, Schlossberg indicated that group settings such as an academic cohort could help students achieve academic success if setup with the necessary supports.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory further expanded on the beliefs of Chickering. Schlossberg believed college students face many challenges that will impact their lives in the short and long term and influence a person's ability to cope with their situation (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Ryan et al. (2011) stated that Schlossberg's Transition Model should be the framework in which higher education officials should model general life transitions for their students. Each of these theories supported the idea behind the creation of academic cohorts. Both Chickering's and Schlossberg's theories stressed the importance of college and universities adapting academic cohorts to meet the ever-changing needs of their diverse student populations. Satisfying the needs of the various student populations directly affects educational outcomes for colleges and universities. "Open admissions replaced selectivity, but institutions anchored in a meritocratic orientation were not prepared to deal with wide-ranging variability in academic preparation, social class, race, and ethnicity" (Chickering, 2010, p. 56). Although Chickering never actually stated academic cohorts were the solution, this statement acknowledges that Chickering recognized that there were developing issues in higher education.

Bruess (2000) believed relationships were critical to moral reasoning and identity development and student affairs practitioners and faculty needed to promote several types of social interaction such as student to student and faculty to student. This social interaction should all be done within diverse populations on college campuses. These relationships are crucial for African American students as noted by Rodgers and Summers (2008) when they stated that, "some African American students at PWIs do not always perceive true social support from significant others, such as faculty" (p. 177-178). Academic cohorts/living learning communities

can be specifically designed to promote social interaction among diverse populations, faculty, and students. "Providing a variety of activities for students, opportunities for faculty to interact with students in residence halls, and cross-cultural programming are some of the many ways interaction can be achieved on college campuses" (Bruess, 2000, p. 65).

Many of Chickering's seven vectors of identity development directly correlated to the needs of students when transitioning into higher education institutions. These transitions are associated with developing competence intellectually, physically, and interpersonally. Bruess (2000) proclaimed,

Students who have a 'sense of competence' in all three areas feel confident about their ability to succeed in class, feel comfortable with their physical abilities, and are confident and know how to behave appropriately in a variety of social situations. (p. 62)

Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) posited that interpersonal competence may include leadership, skills in communication, and working effectively with other individuals.

The second vector of Chickering's Theory of Student Development included managing one's emotions by learning to act in a responsible manner when handling depression, shame, anxiety, guilt, and anger and then begin to move through autonomy toward interdependence by solving problems on their own (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). "I wish we had spoken more directly about the importance of so-called affective outcomes such as self-understanding, tolerance, honesty, citizenship, and social responsibility" (Chickering, 2010, p. 59).

The fourth vector of development is associated with students building healthy, lasting relationships in which students begin to respect the differences of others (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Bruess (2000) stated in reference to Chickering's vectors that college students' moral reasoning is considered "an integral part of an interconnected and often mutually

reinforcing network of developmental trends that characterize changes" (p. 62). Also included in Chickering's developmental theory was for students to establish their own identity and to become more comfortable with their appearance, sexual orientation, and to begin looking for a lifestyle that is meaningful to them (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). At the end of a student's collegiate maturation, the student should begin to develop a purpose and establish a personal value system by crafting their own goals and realizing there are consequences for their actions (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Bruess (2000) claimed that developing a personal value system was the most critical task in the formation of one's identity and this could include learning to value diversity. Academic cohorts are typically comprised of several student populations from various backgrounds and how they are created can dramatically impact how well students persist to graduation.

### **Equity, Ethics and Social Justice**

The issues that affect education for many African American students date back to the pre-Civil War era because African slaves were not allowed to receive an education (Grier-Reed, Arcinue, & Inman, 2016). Since the birth of the United States of America, equity has been elusive. Injustices have been present for centuries, from slavery to Jim Crow laws and beyond. *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) established the separate but equal doctrine that permitted the post-slavery educational injustices. *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) later reversed that decision, but education injustices had already done major damage to this country (Crocco & Waite, 2004). Today, education can be one way to try and level the playing field of the social injustices in America that have existed since the founding of this nation. Although many will agree that education is not the silver bullet that solves all issues, it can help solve many issues. As higher education scholar practitioners, it is extremely important to take an ethical stance in which we

will do everything possible to move this nation forward towards equality for all student populations using education.

First-generation students face many economic challenges that other students do not. Many students who fall in this category have more worries than just attending college because, in addition, they lack economic stability. “First-generation students are more likely to be older when they begin their studies, more commonly have paying jobs and are less likely to feel supported at home” (Ciurczak, 2018). These barriers often lead to lower retention rates and graduation rates for first-generation students. Roughly 89% of low-income, first-generation students leave college within six years without a degree and more than 25% leave after their first year - four times the rate of higher-income, second-generation students (Ciurczak, 2018). This is problematic because of the large number of first-generation students who enter college on a yearly basis. According to Cardoza (2016) nearly one-third of all students who attend college annually are first-generation students. This means that many colleges and universities have a large number of students who are at-risk and may not persist without some type of concerted effort by the institution.

The problem of practice was to understand the efforts by colleges and universities to help break down the barriers faced by many African American and first-generation students. In many cases, African American students must combat systematic racism and they must fight and claw their way to a better life. Also, first-generation students must combat economic classism in order to pursue their American dream. Because of intersectionality, classism is a barrier also faced by African Americans and other students of color. Colleges and universities have the responsibility to help bridge the gap for the disadvantaged. It is the job of scholar practitioners to help deliver social justice.



Merriam Webster's dictionary defines social justice as "A state or doctrine of egalitarianism (Egalitarianism is defined as a social philosophy advocating the removal of inequalities among people.)". How do you remove inequalities? One way to remove inequality is by removing the barriers individuals face, and education is a pivotal piece in promoting social justice. Ornstein (2017) noted the meaning of social justice can mean different things to different people and to understand social justice individuals must understand democracy and providing for the less fortunate. The author identified principles in which society should define social justice which included: improving the lives of people, encouraging democratic principles of mobility, equality, and opportunity, and noting that all lives have equal value and chance for success (Ornstein, 2017).

It is extremely important to enhance student success by finding effective programs which promote social justice, such as academic cohorts, for African American and first-generation students in college. This allows institutions to help the social mobility of students who essentially attend college with negative strikes against them. Carter (2006) stated, "the gap between underrepresented minority students and other groups is particularly detrimental because it affects individuals' long-term social mobility" (p. 33). Completing a college degree is a difficult task as it stands, so extra barriers can be catastrophic for many underrepresented students. Why is this important? Ethically, it is important for a state such as Mississippi that routinely ranks at the bottom in education to provide as many educational opportunities as possible for its citizens. The University of Mississippi, as the state's flagship institution, should lead the charge. Also, Mississippi is home to one of the largest percentages (37.3% second to the District of Columbia at 50.7%) of African Americans in the United States, which makes this population immensely important for the university and the state (World Atlas, 2018).

Turning to national data, first-generation students represent a large population of degree-seeking students who cannot be ignored. Ciurczak (2018) made the following statement,

According to a 2010 study by the U.S. Department of Education, about 50 percent of the college population is made up of students whose parents never enrolled in a school of higher education. The National Center for Education Statistics finds 30 percent of all entering freshmen are first-generation college students. (para. 5)

As first-generation students continue to enroll in larger and larger quantities at institutions of higher learning, colleges and universities will need to take notice of this underrepresented population and make modifications to meet their individual learning needs and expectations.

Demetriou et al. (2017) stated, “appreciating the experiences of FGCS (first-generation college students) who are retained and graduate from college enhances our ability to develop effective retention and degree completion strategies” (p. 20).

### **Research Site**

The University of Mississippi was selected as the research site. The University of Mississippi is a flagship university located in the northern part of the state of Mississippi. This liberal arts university was founded in 1848 and has more than 23,500 students currently enrolled including students at the Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi. An average of 60% of incoming students are from Mississippi and over 23% are minorities (University of Mississippi, 2017). The University of Mississippi is the state’s largest university and has recently received Carnegie classification of R1 which is the highest classification for research institutions in the United States. As stated on the University of Mississippi’s (2017) website,

The University of Mississippi’s mission is to create, evaluate, share, and apply knowledge in a free, open, and inclusive environment of intellectual inquiry.

Building upon a distinguished foundation in the liberal arts, the state's oldest university serves the people of Mississippi and the world through a breadth of academic, research, and professional programs. The University of Mississippi provides an academic experience that emphasizes critical thinking; encourages intellectual depth and creativity; challenges and inspires a diverse community of undergraduate, graduate, and professional students; provides enriching opportunities outside the classroom; supports lifelong learning; and develops a sense of global responsibility.

### **FASTrack: Academic Cohort**

At the University of Mississippi, academic cohorts are one of the solutions used to combat many of the problems and disadvantages faced by African American and first-generation students. Our research could potentially allow us to better understand African American and first-generation students' perceptions of an academic cohort program at the University of Mississippi. We explored the potential efficacy of the Foundations for Academic Success Track (FASTrack) academic cohort program at the University of Mississippi and its service of such programs to meet the needs of underrepresented student populations.

The University of Mississippi houses several different types of academic cohort programs. Specifically, the university touts a highly successful program known as the FASTrack program. Per the FASTrack webpage, the program was “designed to help first-year students’ transition from high school to college in a supportive environment. FASTrack students benefit from smaller and enhanced classes, individualized advising and mentoring, and a community of supportive peers” (University of Mississippi, 2016). This program originated because the University of Mississippi recognized a need to help incoming freshmen with their transition to

college in a smaller, supportive environment. This program utilizes individualized peer and professional mentoring and specialized academic advising. FASTrack instructors are chosen from a variety of disciplines on the University of Mississippi campus. Typical FASTrack courses consist of twenty or fewer students. Cohort classes build a sense of community by having students take three courses together in the fall and spring of their freshman year. As noted on the University of Mississippi's website, in the fall semester, students are required to take the EDHE 105 course (First Year Experience) and WRIT 101 (First-Year Writing I), and a Social Science Elective. The Social Science elective could include PSY 201 (General Psychology) or SOC 101 (Introductory Sociology). In the spring semester, students are required to take WRIT 102 (First-Year Writing II) and an optional BISC 102 (Inquiry into Life Human Biology) or MATH 121 (College Algebra) (University of Mississippi, 2017).

The goal of this study was to determine if the research supports a need for necessary changes to improve the overall FASTrack program for underrepresented students. In addition, other university programs may benefit from the research. Our research findings could also lead to a campus-wide implementation of additional academic cohorts similar to the FASTrack program. The results of this study could allow the University of Mississippi to increase retention and graduation rates, improve existing programs, create new programs, and enhance the overall college experience for all student populations. The findings presented in manuscript two provide detailed information on whether the FASTrack program improves the climate or culture for African American and first-generation students. This research could provide a springboard for additional studies to be conducted regarding academic cohorts at the University of Mississippi.

## **Professional Positionality and Assumptions**

As researchers, we approached this study with objectivity. We recognize that every individual has bias, which is why we want to acknowledge our own individual biases. Acknowledgment of our own personal biases allow us to avoid them and approach the study with a keen researcher eye. Our ties to the University of Mississippi did not influence our ability to accurately present the research, but we must recognize it as a potential bias. Each of the researchers has previously taught at least one FASTrack EDHE 105 course at the University of Mississippi. In addition, both researchers are current employees at the University of Mississippi. We have worked diligently to decrease biases and personal interest when researching these particular student populations, African American and first-generation. For example, if one of the researchers recognized the name of an interviewee, we would recuse ourselves from the interview. We did not want our presence to influence the responses of the interviewee. Also, the surveys were conducted anonymously and distributed by the institution to assure we did not purposely include or omit any student because of prior contact with them in our capacities on campus. Each of the researchers identifies as a first-generation student which created interest in researching this specific student population. The African American student population was chosen because it is the state of Mississippi and the University of Mississippi's largest minority demographic.

### **Positionality and Assumptions – Kim**

Several of the personal and professional assumptions which informed my scholar-practitioner viewpoint regarding academic cohorts being a viable solution to combat problems and disadvantages faced by underrepresented groups began in 2011 when I started teaching EDHE 105, a freshman experience class. It possibly could have started even earlier when I

began my college career as a non-traditional, first-generation student at the University of Mississippi. Most of my assumptions became reality nightmares. As a non-traditional, first-generation student, I was completely lost and felt inadequately prepared to pursue a college degree. I trudged my way through the application process, enrollment procedures, and class registration requirements. I faced many struggles and anxieties before ever stepping foot in my first class. In the classroom, I quickly realized I was often the oldest person in the room and was many times mistaken for the instructor. I felt so out of my element and intimidated by those fresh out of high school, knowledgeable scholars. I could not talk to anyone in my family about my challenges. My family was not familiar with any of the college processes and were not able to offer any suggestions. I remember after several years of taking classes, my mother asked me why I continued to subject myself to homework, studying, and taking course after course. She found it odd that I did so, because in her opinion I had it made. I was a secretary making around \$6.50 an hour but I wanted more. But to her, I had accomplished everything I should ever need because I was not working in a factory at minimum wage or for production as she had done most of her life. These were only a few of the struggles I faced as I began my career as a student.

Once I began teaching EDHE 105 (freshman seminar), I realized many of the students in my classroom could be facing some of the same challenges I had encountered. It soon became my mission to become a resource for these students. I wanted to seek out my fellow disadvantaged, first-generation scholars. Just like me, these students needed extra social support to reach their academic goals. It was possible they did not have anyone to help them understand their struggles and support them. Their family also might not understand how or what to do to help. These first-generation students need a social network group encouraging them to obtain their degree. Sometimes as a student, you are unable to verbalize your needs because you do not

understand them enough to explain them. Therefore, you just attend class after class pretending you understand the coursework, requirements, and teacher expectations. Often you just need a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear, or someone to provide you with sound advice to help you solve your problems. First-generation students need someone to understand their challenges and who can provide insight because they too faced many of the same challenges or experiences. This student population needs an advocate who will encourage them to stay in school and obtain their degree. Sadly, in my opinion, we do not have enough of these advocates on our campus to support first-generation students.

Each of my own challenges and struggles shaped my attitudes, behaviors, and practices towards first-generation students' experiences. My experiences constantly reinforced my desire to combat and overcome the problems faced by this underrepresented student population. As a practitioner, I would love to be involved more with this group of students. I would love to be able to become their voice and create change on our campus. I want university administrators, staff, and faculty to see this population requires extra support and motivation to be successful and create additional programs to help these students.

Since beginning this doctoral study, my passion to alleviate the negative pressures and lack of guidance these disadvantaged students experience has only multiplied. I wish for this demographic to be given what is due to them: an exceptional quality higher education experience without any personal or academic struggle. I am not insinuating this population should be given special treatment or shown any type of favoritism. I am simply stating this population will very likely not reach graduation without an extra boost or extreme high encouragement from individuals who believe in and for them. Each student on our campus should be able to achieve their own personal higher education goals. In fact, this reality is further enforced each fall

semester as I step in front of my EDHE 105 class. At the beginning of the semester, each student has a dazed and confused look on their face and seem to start out on the same playing field, but those first-generation students quickly appear to be lost and in need of rescuing as their challenges can quickly escalate.

### **Positionality and Assumptions – Sovent**

There are several personal and professional views and assumptions that informed my view as a scholar-practitioner with regards to academic cohorts. Professionally, I have been part of countless retention meetings where questions are asked about the retention rates of African American male students. At the University of Mississippi, African American males have the lowest retention rates out of all ethnicities. Why is this? I thought academic cohorts were in place to help with this type of particular issue. This caused me to ask the question, “Do academic cohorts adequately serve African American males?” I then wondered how many other underrepresented student populations were being helped by academic cohorts, specifically the highly touted FASTrack program. As an African American male, I have experienced many obstacles that a person of color faces when attending a predominantly white institution. When I was in school, there were not any academic cohorts to assist me in overcoming any challenging obstacles. There was not anyone to help me transition socially or academically. I knew I had to adapt a sink-or-swim mentality in order to survive and I was not the type of person that wanted to drown in the unknown waters of higher education. As I thought back to my college days, I realized I was a member of each of the underrepresented categories being researched: first-generation and African American male. For me, it was important to know if higher education had progressed since my earlier years in college. How was the University of Mississippi assisting students like me some twenty years later?



I believe the flagship university in one of the poorest states in America should be the driving force behind social mobility for the citizens of Mississippi. This should be demonstrated by practices that allow students from the rural delta to improve their life just as much as the student from affluent Madison County. This is a social agreement the University of Mississippi has made to the people of Mississippi. Therefore, academic cohorts can potentially have a significant positive impact on underrepresented students.

I have always viewed academic cohorts as programs that bolster academic achievement. When deciding to research academic cohorts, I had to challenge myself to look at things from a more objective perspective at least to the extent possible. I also discovered through my doctoral study that I must also view things from all the stakeholders' perspectives. As we were introduced to scholarly readings about equity, ethics, and social justice, it was as though I was introduced to an entirely new planet. Discovering the importance of equity, ethics, and social justice forced me to take inventory of everything I thought I knew prior to my doctoral journey. It forced deeper inquiry into my problem of practice and a deeper inquiry into myself as a scholar-practitioner. My doctoral studies challenged me to look past basic statistics because there could be something more than data to collect and review. Diving deeper into research allows all stakeholders in higher education to truly make the most informed decisions.

### **Data Analysis and Dissemination**

This research was presented utilizing a three-manuscript format. The introduction manuscript presents the topic and provides background information via a literature review. The research focused on specific underrepresented student populations within a targeted academic cohort, which is the FASTrack program at the University of Mississippi. The two student populations researched were African American students and first-generation students and their

perspectives were evaluated and are included in the second manuscript. The final manuscript includes the conclusion and explains the results of the research and provides suggestions for moving forward, as well as, gives recommendations for the need for further research.

After the background of academic cohorts and the FASTrack program, our research is presented. The target populations for interviews and surveys included students who previously participated in the FASTrack program and who are currently enrolled at the University of Mississippi. These student population groups provided valuable insight from their own experiences and involvement in the FASTrack academic cohort. However, utilizing only these student populations did limit our research findings. We did not have access to students who are no longer enrolled at the University of Mississippi due to privacy restrictions. The research included anonymous information from the following areas: The University of Mississippi Office of Institutional Research, data from the FASTrack Office, interviews of FASTrack alumni, and surveys completed by FASTrack alumni.

In order to acquire the data, approval from the Institutional Research Board (IRB) was obtained. The abbreviated IRB application was submitted and approved by the University of Mississippi's Institutional Research Board prior to collection of the data. The methodology for this research was conducted using primarily a qualitative research approach. Quantitative data was also used in this study for supplemental information.

Data was collected via an electronic survey distributed by the University of Mississippi Office of Institutional Research to ensure compliance of FERPA laws. The survey was distributed to any student the University of Mississippi classified as a FASTrack student enrolled during the 2016-2017 academic year. Student classifications varied from sophomore to senior status. Freshmen currently enrolled in the FASTrack program were not included in this study.

The survey distribution list included students who successfully completed the one-year program and students who did not successfully complete the program (which may include current students who dropped out of the FASTrack program). Individuals who did not persist and are no longer enrolled at the university (i.e., transfers, academic dismissals, and withdrawals) did not receive the survey. In this study, academic cohorts shall be defined as a group of 15–25 students who were enrolled in a minimum number of academic courses together during the fall and spring semesters of their freshman year.

Additional data collection obtained from institutional research possessed information regarding all FASTrack participants during a five-year span. This data included facts about all FASTrack participants regardless of their enrollment status. The components within this data provided insight about students who did not persist and are no longer enrolled at the University of Mississippi. These students were not accessible for any type of interview because their identity was unknown based on student privacy protection laws.

Qualitative data collection was conducted via a survey and through a series of one-on-one student interviews. Student surveys were distributed via email to FASTrack participants. Several students volunteered for personal interviews. These undergraduate students recommended additional students as other possible interview candidates. These recommendations were evaluated to determine if these individuals successfully completed, unsuccessfully completed, or did not participate in the FASTrack program. Grade point averages and retention rates were assessed based on quantitative and qualitative data retrieved from Institutional Research and the FASTrack Office.

Student interviews were conducted following completion of the online survey. Students were selected for interviews based on the following qualifications:

- African American Female – First-Generation
- Caucasian Female – First-Generation
- African American Male – First-Generation
- Caucasian Male – First-Generation
- African American Female
- Caucasian Female
- African American Male
- Caucasian Male

The interviews took place on the University of Mississippi campus at a convenient, central location. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. After transcription, coding of this data was utilized to find common themes. Students volunteered based on the recruitment email notification that was originally sent with the survey request. Other students were able to volunteer based on interviewee recommendations. These verbal recommendations by students and instructors proved to be extremely helpful. In addition to survey responses, the interview provided additional context to the study. Interviews were conducted with a variety of students based on predetermined demographics to ensure all student populations were evaluated. Researchers contacted previous EDHE 105 students and instructors for additional student interviewee participants.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **DATA INTERPRETATION MANUSCRIPT**

In manuscript one, the researchers provided a detailed literature review of how we came to discover our problem of practice, which was to better understand the efforts by colleges and universities to combat the challenges and barriers faced by African American and first-generation students. Specifically, we focused on the efforts by the University of Mississippi through the use of an academic cohort program. The purpose of this research was to explore the potential efficacy of the Foundations for Academic Success Track (FASTrack) academic cohort program at the University of Mississippi and its service of such programs to meet the needs of underrepresented student populations. According to students' perceptions can learning communities provide measurable rewards in regard to overall student satisfaction, increased social interaction, and other long-term benefits? Do students believe academic cohorts positively influence their grade point averages and provide positive social and academic transitions?

As scholar-practitioners, we are advocates of quality programs that promote student success. As underrepresented students who are now scholar-practitioners, we felt it was necessary to approach the research from the viewpoint of underrepresented student populations with regards to the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) principles of equity, ethics, and social justice.

Many campuses have diverse student populations that require different types of academic and social support services. Some populations require special arrangements catered to each students' specific needs and abilities. Students arrive to campus with different life experiences, levels of academic preparation, and varying expectations. African American and first-generation students represent populations often overlooked and who have received the same ubiquitous education as all other types of students (Housel, 2012). Academic cohorts can potentially serve as a solution to combating these many challenges.

At the University of Mississippi, the FASTrack program is an academic cohort program that purports to aid African American and first-generation students in being academically successful. To provide context for our analysis of the FASTrack program, we first look to the literature surrounding academic cohorts for African American and/or first-generation students. For the purpose of this research, first-generation students shall be defined as a student in which neither parent obtained a degree from a four-year institution. By academic cohorts, we are referring to a group of students enrolled at an institution of higher learning during a certain time frame, working through a particular curriculum alongside fellow FASTrack academic cohort members, in order to achieve an academic degree.

Academic cohorts have taken on many different variations since their conception and are typically modified to fit the individual needs of the institutions they are serving. There are many benefits to being a member of an academic cohort both for the institution and the student. According to Lei, Gorelick, Short, Smallwood, and Wright-Porter (2011) student members of a cohort built positive peer relationships, felt a sense of cohesiveness with classmates, formed social/professional networks, developed emotional ties, and created academic support systems. The university saw higher retention rates and more successful graduation rates from students in

the cohort. Students who are experiencing similar social and academic transitions often find success when taking coursework together.

Academic courses may or may not be based on predetermined factors such as major, classification, or degree program. In addition, other students classified as low-income, minority, first-generation, honors, academically underprepared, having a disability, or other targeted groups may enroll in learning communities to build a community which can help develop citizenship, create a body of learners, foster a sense of belonging, and engage in transformative learning experiences while allowing for interactions between academic, social, and personal activities (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012). As noted by Fink and Hummel (2015) learning communities that are designed specifically for underserved populations can deliver quality educational experiences to first-generation students, transfer students, students of color, students with disabilities, international students, student veterans, or low-income students. These disadvantaged students can receive the extra boost, encouragement, support, and resources needed to be successful in college and obtain a baccalaureate degree. In addition, students who participate in learning communities typically experience benefits in their overall emotional, spiritual, social, and physical development (Frazier & Eighmy, 2012).

### **Background of Academic Cohorts**

Goldman (2012) specified, “When students’ progress from high school to university, they are challenged by academic, social, and developmental transitions” (p.14). Erickson, Walker, Laws, Fitzgerald, and Burwell (2015) posited that institutions of higher learning must incorporate modifications to their programs to meet underprepared students’ needs and learning styles or these students will fail. Baker (2013) declared, “under-represented students at selective

colleges continue to face challenges to their academic success, and support from the college environment is a key factor in the academic success of many of these students” (p. 632).

As discussed in manuscript one, academic cohorts are one type of program colleges and universities can incorporate to help foster academic and social success for African American and first-generation students. Academic cohorts were designed to further academic achievements. In their early stages of development, academic cohorts were crafted in response to higher education reform (Lei et al., 2011). For the most part, American education was narrow-minded in terms of equal educational opportunities for those seeking an education (Myers, n.d.). In fact, “learning communities are a timely response to contemporary issues in higher education” (“Learning Community Foundations,” 1990, p. 5). As noted by Fink and Hummel (2015), “effective learning communities that focus on underserved student populations will leverage positive messages of achievement and change to yield desired outcomes” (p. 36). Underserved student populations are enrolling in college at an increasing rate. Colleges need to be able to meet this demand. Higher education institutions must be willing to incorporate change in order to better serve all their student populations.

Academic cohorts have been defined in numerous ways by various entities. Abbondante, Caple, Ghazzawi, and Schantz (2014) defined learning communities (a type of academic cohort) as being the same cohort of students taking a set of courses within different disciplines together with the goal of enabling students to apply knowledge to real world problems. Goldman (2012) noted that learning communities consist of a cohort of students taking at least two block scheduled courses together and “the common goal of learning communities is to improve the overall undergraduate education experience, including increasing a student’s sense of intellectual and social integration with the institution” (p. 1). Lei et al. (2011) defines cohorts as “...a group



of about 10-25 students who begin a program of study together, proceed together through a series of developmental experiences in the context of that program of study, and end the program at approximately the same time” (p. 498).

All of these authors discuss the students in learning communities as having certain coursework that they take together, just as the students we will later discuss in the FASTrack program at the University of Mississippi. Per Ericksen et al., (2015) living learning community programs (a type of academic cohort) can provide “intensive and intentional academic and personal support to students who desire to take advantage of the unique learning experiences these communities provide” (p. 1). Our goal was to investigate how the FASTrack students perceive the support and its usefulness in their educational experience at the University.

Fink and Hummel (2015) maintained, “learning communities designed for underserved student populations are emerging, and by nature of their target populations these programs are well positioned to assist institutions in delivering quality educational experiences to traditionally underserved students” (p. 29). We know that both first-generation and African American students, the students we have targeted within FASTrack for the purposes of this research, face similar obstacles in their transition to college. “College students who do not have parents with 4-year degrees (first-generation students) earn lower grades and encounter more obstacles to success than do students who have at least one parent with a 4-year degree (continuing-generation students)” (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014, p. 943). Per Fink and Hummel (2015), when learning communities are framed as faculty mentorships, linked courses, or a series of program offerings to enhance students’ college experiences, they will be more supportive and more effective to underserved student populations when they advocate for improvement across the entire campus for all underserved populations.

To understand the need for academic cohorts, institutions must understand the students' perspectives of the effectiveness of the academic cohorts to which they belong. Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2012) noted, "studying and evaluating factors affecting African-American success at PWIs would help college and university retention staffs better understand the unique obstacles facing African-American students, and consequently improve retention" (p. 208). In line with this recommendation, our research aims to gain a better understanding of the educational experiences of first-generation and African American students in the FASTrack academic cohort program at the University of Mississippi.

### **Underrepresented Student Populations**

Many African American and first-generation students arrive to college academically underprepared, socially immature, and emotionally distracted for various reasons. Baker and Robnett (2012) stressed that underrepresented students have responsibilities outside of college such as family obligations or work that can distract students from their college responsibilities and possibly hinder their college success. Brooks (2015) pointed out many factors which influence African American students' collegiate experiences including: family support, family issues at home, and the student feeling as though they are being a financial burden to family members. In addition, Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2012) commented, "students of color, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, often have trouble meeting the academic demands of college or finding a social niche at institutions of higher learning" (p. 207). Baker and Robnett (2012) remarked, "students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often lack social and cultural capital that would aid in their educational attainment" (p. 325). African American and first-generation students need an extra set of resources to help with their acclimation to college.

Numerous African American and first-generation students grow up in poverty stricken environments which limit their exposure to extra-curricular social activities, provide finite academic resources, and furnish no financial funding for college. Baker and Robnett (2012) asserted, “racial and ethnic differences in college completion are often attributed to factors related to socioeconomic background and primary and secondary school experiences” (p. 325). In addition, many parents are unable to financially, academically, or emotionally support their college aged children because of the parents’ lack of time, limited financial resources, educational ability, and other obligations. Brooks (2015) stated that “high-achieving students frequently cited family and parental support as a positive influence on their academic success. This included emotional, academic, and financial support” (p. 819).

Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2012) pointed out,

The lack of academic preparation, absence of other students with similar cultural backgrounds, and financial need, coupled with the anxieties of being away from home, all contribute to freshmen students leaving school. The first year away from home and the unfamiliar settings are grueling for all college students. (p. 207)

For this reason alone, students need programs which will increase their likelihood of staying in college. As noted by Baker and Robnett (2012) underrepresented students are often distracted by family or employment obligations when they return home and these types of distractions can hinder students’ success because they feel they are neglecting their home responsibilities.

Each of these factors can prohibit students from receiving an exceptional college education. How do colleges combat the deficiencies which African American and first-generation students face as soon as they arrive on college campuses? Is it the responsibility of

the college to meet these needs? How do colleges and universities level the playing field for underrepresented students?

The focus of this manuscript is the analysis of survey and qualitative data (in the form of interviews) collected from FASTrack students at the University of Mississippi, many of whom self-identified as African American and/or first-generation students. The definition of first-generation can be defined in several different ways and oftentimes without a consensus according to Arnold and Barratt (2015). Hand and Payne (2008) stated “traditionally ‘first-generation’ has meant that neither parent has graduated from college” (p. 4). Hand and Payne’s definition of first-generation students will be used for the purpose of this study.

## **Data Overview**

### **Collection Methods**

Data collection focused on common themes gathered from surveys and interviews of FASTrack students during the research period which was the 2016-2017 academic year at the University of Mississippi. The data used spanned across a five-year time period (2012-2016). A variety of survey and research questions were crafted in order to collect information in regard to African American and first-generation students’ perspectives of the FASTrack program. Survey questions for FASTrack participants were designed so students could list their majors, provide knowledge about their instructors, staff advisor, and student mentor; specify the students’ classification as sophomore, junior, or senior; supply their ethnicity and gender; acknowledge their parents’ educational background; and any other comments the students felt comfortable sharing for the survey. In addition, students were questioned about their decision to attend college and why they selected the University of Mississippi. Interviewees were asked to discuss the resources they used during their college selection process. Other questions were

crafted that allowed students to discuss their thoughts about the FASTrack program, such as: would the student recommend FASTrack to other students and were FASTrack instructors supportive more or less than other university instructors? A complete list of questions is included in the Appendix. The methodology for this research was conducted using primarily a qualitative research approach. Quantitative data from the Office of Institutional Research at the University of Mississippi was also used in this study to provide supplemental information for the analysis.

Institutional Research data included facts about all FASTrack participants regardless of their enrollment status. This data consisted of student classification, grade-point averages at the end of semesters one and two, degree programs, persistence, ethnicity, gender, hours earned at the end of semesters one and two, and FASTrack cohort year. The components within this data provided insight on students who did not persist and are no longer enrolled at the University of Mississippi. These students are not accessible for any type of interview because their identity was unknown based on student privacy protection laws.

### **Survey Data**

Data was collected via an electronic survey distributed by the University of Mississippi Office of Institutional Research to ensure compliance with FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) laws. The survey was distributed to any student the University of Mississippi classified as a FASTrack student enrolled during the 2016-2017 academic year. Student classifications varied from sophomore to senior status. Freshmen currently enrolled in the FASTrack program were not included in this study. These students have yet to complete the FASTrack program and are therefore not in position to adequately evaluate the program. Students who successfully completed the one-year program and students who did not

successfully complete the program (which may include current students who dropped out of the FASTrack program) were included in this study. Individuals who did not persist and are no longer enrolled at the university (i.e., transfers, academic dismissals, and withdrawals) did not receive the survey. In this study, academic cohorts shall be defined as a group of 15-25 students who are enrolled in a minimum number of academic courses together during the fall and spring semesters of their freshman year.

Qualitative data collection was conducted via survey and through a series of one-on-one student interviews. Student surveys were distributed by the Office of Institutional Research, at the request of the researchers, via email to all FASTrack students utilizing Qualtrics. According to Qualtrics, 775 emails were distributed, but 43 were returned due to an invalid email address. Seven hundred-thirty students received the survey via email. According to Qualtrics, 143 students started the survey and 104 students completed the survey yielding a 72.7 percent completion rate. The survey included 16 items available for students' responses. Nine of the 16 questions were open-ended, which allowed for flexibility of student responses. Four of the responses were focused on demographics including classification, ethnicity, gender, and first-generation status. The final two survey questions were Likert scale responses that focused on the program benefit and student comfort level for the FASTrack program. The Likert scale responses ranged from not beneficial to very beneficial and extremely uncomfortable to extremely comfortable. The final question was in regard to Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) students. Throughout the analysis process, it was determined that this question was not relevant and it was not used in this study. Survey data and responses are stored on Qualtrics and are available in the appendix.

## **Interview Data**

Student interviews were conducted to provide a more in-depth insight of students' perceptions in regard to the FASTrack program at the University of Mississippi. Several students volunteered for personal interviews. Additionally, these undergraduate students recommended additional students as other possible interview candidates. The student interview recommendations either contacted the researchers or were contacted by the researchers. It was then determined if the potential interviewees fit the criteria for inclusion in the study.

The interviews took place on the University of Mississippi campus at a convenient, central location. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. After transcription, open coding of this data was utilized to find common themes. Students volunteered based on the recruitment email notification that was originally sent with the survey request. Other students were able to volunteer based on interviewee recommendations. These verbal recommendations by students and instructors proved to be extremely helpful. In addition to survey responses, the interviews provided additional context to the study. Interviews were conducted with a variety of students based on predetermined demographics including African American students, first-generation students, Caucasian students, and STEM majors. The interviewees were categorized by demographics in the following format: African American male number one, Caucasian female number one, and first-generation female number one, and so on. Similar to the survey results, it was determined that the STEM interviews were not relevant to the results of the study. Interviews were transcribed by the researchers.

## **Limitations/Delimitations**

There are several limitations that must be recognized for this study. Students who are no longer enrolled at the university cannot be surveyed or interviewed because FERPA laws prevent

access to their personal information. Other underrepresented populations were not interviewed. Although students who identify as Hispanic, Asian, or other ethnic minorities are considered underrepresented unless classified as first-generation, they were not the primary focus of this study and therefore not included. Also, research was not conducted on any other academic cohorts (such as LuckyDay or Honors College) at the University of Mississippi. The sample was limited to those previous FASTrack students who voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. We did not have access to students who are no longer enrolled at the University of Mississippi due to privacy restrictions.

Additional limitations included the fact that both researchers have previously taught at least one FASTrack course at the University of Mississippi and both researchers are current employees at the University of Mississippi. This can be viewed as a limitation because of creating institutional biases and personal interest in these particular student populations. However, it can also be viewed in a positive light because of the researchers' ability to use their intricate institutional knowledge as context for the students' responses.

Another significant limitation the researchers discovered was that the data obtained from Institutional Research erroneously labeled some students as FASTrack students in the university's student database who did not actually participate in the FASTrack program. Based on a preliminary interview with the current Director of the FASTrack program, we deduced that this error occurred when the aforementioned students withdrew from the program prior to or during their first fall semester.

Researchers chose to only interview students who are African American, first-generation, and Caucasian. Caucasian students constitute the majority of students at this predominantly white institution (PWI), and African American students make up the largest minority population.



Therefore, the researchers felt it was important to focus only on these three populations. This study was limited only to students enrolled at the University of Mississippi beginning in the fall term of 2012 and ending in spring of the 2017 term.

The first-generation student population was chosen because both researchers identify as first-generation students. First-generation students are a population uniquely suited for academic cohorts because this population typically has limited information about the overall college experience and encounter more difficulty transitioning to college. Historically, this student population has been overlooked at many four-year institutions (Housel, 2012) and we wanted to better understand whether and how FASTrack was serving this population at the University of Mississippi.

### **Research Deficits**

This study focused on the students' perceptions of the FASTrack academic cohort. The major deficit in this study was the inability to locate students who participated in FASTrack who were no longer enrolled at the University of Mississippi. If future researchers could discover a method to contact those former students, then it would give a more thorough representation of all FASTrack students' perceptions. This step could potentially give the institution more information about why the former students did not persist. The surveys and interviews allowed for extensive qualitative research. However, because of FERPA laws, there was a deficit in quantitative research. Doing a comparative analysis of grade-point averages may provide more insight and may allow researchers to determine if the students' perceptions of their academic achievements matched their actual academic achievement. Because of the aforementioned FERPA laws, this particular step may not be achievable.

The study could also be strengthened in the future by surveying and interviewing students who participated in other academic cohorts at the University of Mississippi. This step could provide more insight to academic cohorts as a whole. It may also allow the institution to review all of its academic cohorts to determine if they in fact reduce or remove the barriers faced by underrepresented students at the University of Mississippi.

### **Concerns and Challenges**

Conducting research in our own “backyard” can often include obstacles. One obstacle may be previous relationships between researchers and students (i.e. former professor or academic advisor). This relationship could provide an opportunity for conflict of interest between the scholar-practitioners and the student research subjects. As researchers, it was important to remain ethical in both the collection and use of data. For this reason, the University of Mississippi required Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Once approval was received, we were given specific guidelines on how we should collect the student information. FERPA laws required signed consent forms from each student who participated in one-on-one interviews. When attempting to collect institutional data, we were not allowed access to personal identifying information about the students at the University of Mississippi.

Originally, the researchers attempted to use the quantitative data from the Office of Institutional Research. Although we were given information on thousands of students, it did not prove beneficial for the analysis of this particular research study. For example, when conducting a comparison of FASTrack versus non-FASTrack grade point averages, we discovered that all of the honors students were listed in the non-FASTrack grade point averages. Because the Honors College is a specialized academic cohort, those students cannot participate in the FASTrack

cohort. For this reason, the data was not precise for comparisons and this prevented the researchers from analyzing the grade-point averages of students included in the data file.

## **Presentation of Findings**

### **Presentation of Survey Results**

The students were asked many open-ended questions in the surveys which allowed them the liberty to say what was on their mind. With most questions in the survey, the students were not limited by a Likert scale. On the other hand, there were some cases where the Likert scale was extremely beneficial because it allowed for a more universal collection of data when comparing experiences such as comfort level within FASTrack and overall program benefits. Both survey methods were needed in order to better understand the perspectives of the students.

The results of the survey provide a descriptive look at multiple student populations not just African American or first-generation students. The 104 students who completed the survey responded to questions that included several demographic areas: gender, ethnicity, classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior), resident state/region, enrollment status (full-time, part-time), college or school that houses their program of study, and program of study.

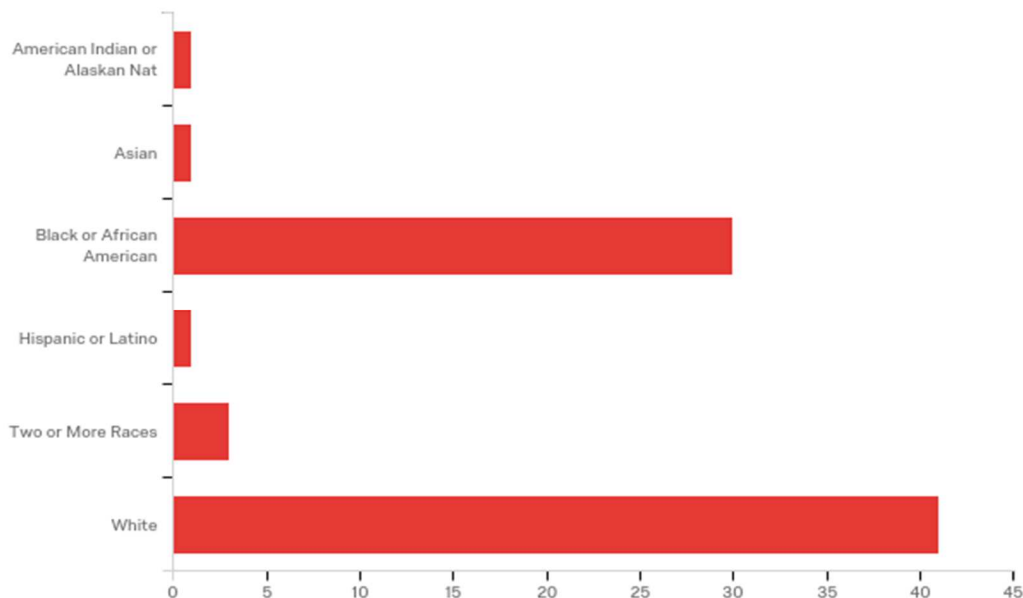
The majority of students who responded to this survey were Mississippi residents (nearly 60%). This was expected as the university is located in the state of Mississippi. The nonresident respondents (just over 40%) were from various states. Because of this, nonresident respondents were grouped by region (Southeast, Northeast, Midwest, and West). The Southeast students included all the states below Washington, D.C. that are located in the Southeast region. The largest percent of nonresident students surveyed were from the Southeast (58%). The West and the Midwest each produced approximately 16% of the nonresident students, with the Northeast

representing nearly 10% of the nonresident students. Texas and California produced the largest population of nonresident students at nearly 12% each.

Students were given a choice whether to identify with nine different identities on the gender identity spectrum. Out of the responses, over 67% of students identified as female, over 30% identified as male and just under two percent preferred not to disclose.

When students were asked about ethnicity, they were given six options from which to choose. Exactly 50% of the respondents identified as Caucasian/White, while just under 44% of respondents were Black or African American. Nearly three percent of students who responded identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, while less than one percent identified as Hispanic or Latino (See Figure 1). As you can see in figure one, the demographics of FASTrack closely related to the demographics of the state of Mississippi with regards to the Caucasian and African American population (World Atlas, 2018).

*Figure 1*

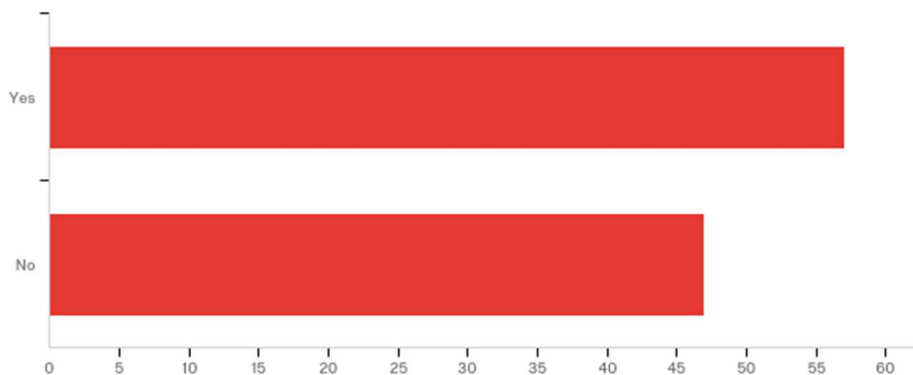


When discussing classification, freshmen and sophomores were considered underclassmen, while juniors and seniors were considered upperclassmen. In this survey, just

over 35% of the respondents were underclassmen while just under 65% were upperclassmen. Of that 35%, all of them were sophomores. This classification was to be expected, as current freshmen in FASTrack were not invited to participate in the survey. Of the nearly 65% of the upperclassmen who responded, the majority (35%) were juniors, while the rest (28%) were seniors. All of the students who responded to the survey were classified as full-time students.

Students were asked if their parents graduated from college with a four-year degree. This question was used to determine the number of first-generation students who were participating in the FASTrack program. Approximately 45% of students would fall into the category of first-generation students (See Figure 2).

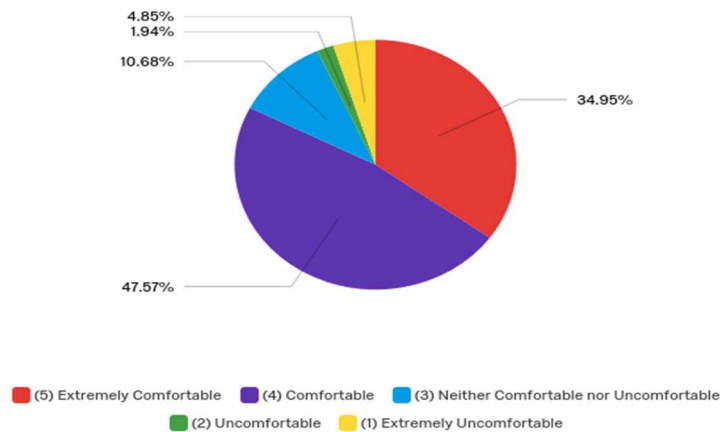
*Figure 2*



When students were asked how beneficial they found the FASTrack program, most gave a positive response. Nearly 81% of students found FASTrack either very beneficial or beneficial. Just under ten percent of students did not believe FASTrack to be beneficial to them. When students were asked about their comfort level while in the FASTrack program, they responded favorably. Approximately 82% of students indicated they felt either comfortable or

extremely comfortable while in the FASTrack program. Only six percent of students felt uncomfortable or extremely uncomfortable while participating in the program (See Figure 3).

Figure 3



The students who responded in the survey represented every college or school on the campus of the University of Mississippi. The colleges and schools are as follows: College of Liberal Arts, General Studies, Meek School of Journalism and New Media, Patterson School of Accountancy, School of Applied Sciences, School of Business Administration, School of Education, School of Engineering, and the School of Pharmacy. The College of Liberal Arts had the highest percentage of students at nearly 37%. General Studies was the next most popular school with nearly 24% of the respondents. The School of Business Administration (nearly 11%) and the School of Applied Sciences (approximately nine percent) were home to the next largest number of respondents. The other programs had less than four percent of students located in their college or school.

There were a significant variety of majors represented in the responses. There were 28 different majors reported by students with just over 23% of them being undeclared or not yet decided on a major. Business majors made up the majority of the declared students

(approximately 12%). These results reflect the variety of degrees pursued by students who participated in the survey.

### **Presentation of Interview Results**

The results of the interviews provided an even more in-depth view into the student perceptions about the FASTrack academic cohort program. The students were strategically chosen because they fit the demographics being specifically researched (African American and first-generation). Caucasian and African American FASTrack students who were not first-generation were also interviewed to provide an opposite perspective. The students were asked mostly open-ended questions about the FASTrack program which allowed for less restricted and honest replies.

There were 12 students interviewed for this study. Six of them were African American and six of them were Caucasian. There were six males and six females. Four of the students interviewed were first-generation students. The individuals who were selected for the one-on-one interviews were not randomly chosen. To ensure each student populations' voice was heard, we, as researchers, took steps to warrant each student demographic in our research was interviewed. A careful analysis and selection process was utilized. In addition, an equal number of male/female, Caucasian/African American, and first-generation/non-generation students were interviewed so each student demographic comparison could be possible.

The interviewees were all asked similar questions which centered on commonalities for first-year college students. These commonalities included the following topics: social engagement, social transitions from high school to college, program changes, and other topics that were introduced by the student during the interview.

The researchers engaged in open coding to determine the primary benefits and concerns for the interviewees. The student responses were coded based on meanings which emerged from each of the interview responses and not based on existing labels. The open coding used by the researchers charted the amount of times the students spoke positively or negatively about topics related to the research. Social Engagement was the number one benefit of the FASTrack program according to the students interviewed. Because social engagement was mentioned 79 different times during the student interviews, the researchers felt this was a primary benefit perceived by our student populations. Program changes was also determined to be extremely important as it was mentioned 70 times during the student interviews. Social transitions were the third most frequently cited topic, mentioned 60 different times.

The frequency at which these topics were mentioned shows the importance of these areas to the students who were interviewed. Although these results highlight the importance of these topics using frequency, the most beneficial information was gleaned from the student quotes. Several of these quotes will be utilized in the next section as we present an in-depth analysis into the common themes.

### **Common Findings**

The analysis of the data focused on the students' perspectives of the FASTrack program at the University of Mississippi. The survey questions and interviews gave the researchers an in-depth look at what students thought about the FASTrack program. In short, the interviews and surveys provided more context to the program beyond any surface level statistical data on grade point averages and retention. The survey and interviews informed the researchers on the specific takeaways from the students' perspectives.



The interviews and surveys yielded several common responses from many of the students. These responses were qualified through coding by the researchers where three major collective themes emerged. A thematic report on both African American and first-generation students' responses will be presented. The common themes discovered during the research were: Social Transitions and Engagement and Academic Transitions.

The researchers believe these common themes provide information on the students' perceptions of what they gained from the FASTrack academic cohort program and insight about whether the students found the program to be sufficient in breaking down the barriers for underrepresented student populations. This may be the springboard for institutions like the University of Mississippi to more adequately serve underrepresented students utilizing academic cohorts.

### **Social Transitions and Engagement**

For the purpose of this study, Social Transition is defined as the ability of students to socially transition from a high school graduate to incoming college freshman. These transitions may include building a sense of community with classmates and professors and adjusting to a more diverse population. In short, Social Transition is adjusting to a new environment and finding comfort. Social Engagement is defined as social interactions of the student within the new environment. This may include creating a new social circle and increased involvement in activities on and off campus. Spanierman et al. (2013) stated a sense of belonging and a sense of community can positively impact academic performance, increase self-worth, provide feelings of value, and create positive social connections on a university campus.

## **African American Students**

The African American student population at many predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher learning often need extra academic, social, and emotional support to achieve the necessary graduation requirements that four-year institutions publish for degree obtainment (Baker and Robnett, 2012).

Student input can often be overlooked, which is why we, the researchers, focused on the participants' perspectives. When asked in the survey if they felt the program was helpful, the African American students found the program to be almost universally beneficial with ninety-three percent reporting the FASTrack program to be either beneficial (42%) or very beneficial (51%). Only 7% of the African American students found the program not to be beneficial at all.

What factors contributed to the African American students believing the FASTrack program was beneficial? One of the reasons African American students found this program beneficial was because it provided a sense of community. Social transition is extremely important for underrepresented students because they are attending an institution of higher learning where very few people look like them.

Finding a sense of community in a new place can ease the anxiety of social transition and provide a much-needed support system. One African American male, classified as a junior at the University of Mississippi replied in his survey, "I was able to make bigger progress by being environmentally prepared. Rather than being exposed to the large-scale environment, I was guided through a group of great students and companions with whom I remain friends with to this day." The sense of community cannot be overstated. Students often experience significant personal issues or problems that are unknown to university administrators, faculty, or staff. This implies that university services, such as the counseling center, may never be utilized by the

student who could benefit from this type of program the most. Therefore, having a community who knows and cares about you can often encourage students through many tough life situations. In fact, this was perfectly described by one African American female student during her interview when she verbalized,

FASTrack benefited me by giving me a community, smaller classes, and a family away from home. I loved that I saw my cohort three times out of the week. Indirectly, I had someone accountable for me. I think that's great to know that you have peers who take the same classes as you. It made it easier to find study partners and to form friends. Most of the people I met while being in FASTrack and while living in Burns Hall, I am still friends with to this day. FASTrack gave me a family away from home because during my freshman year, my grandmother passed away. I missed class for two weeks. When I returned, I had to visit with my academic mentor, peer mentor, and my professors so we could decide on a plan for me to finish this semester strong despite of me grieving. Also, upon me returning, my Burns Hall floor mates and my friends threw me a 'Welcome Back' surprise party. So, without FASTrack I don't think I would've made it through me losing my grandmother or freshman year.

In comparison, when surveying Caucasian students about the benefits of the FASTrack program, it was discovered that only 27% of Caucasian students felt the program was very beneficial to them. This number is almost half when compared to the African American students in the program. Forty-seven percent of Caucasian students said the program was beneficial which is nearly identical to the African American student population. However, almost 25% of Caucasian students found the program not beneficial at all. The Caucasian students seemed to have a vastly different outlook on what the FASTrack program had to offer them. One white

male student from New Jersey who was surveyed stated, “I was able to become close with a lot of kids, since we were in the same classes, most of which I still am today. The teachers were very hands-on and would welcome any participation during discussion.” Despite some differences among groups, most Caucasian and African American students discussed the benefits of smaller class sizes and building faculty and peer relationships.

The majority of the students seemed to highlight social transition as a successful measure of the FASTrack program as opposed to the academic benefits. One student spoke about her first interactions with different ethnic groups and how the program helped with her social transition. An African American female student that was interviewed stated, “I say basically my high school didn’t have white people really. Um, like coming here was the first time I had like real interaction with white people. Because all our white people went to a private school.” Another junior African American female student who participated in the survey was even more specific when she indicated, “FASTrack was more beneficial socially than academically for me.”

Although fewer in number, there are students who found FASTrack to be academically beneficial. One African American male student who was interviewed replied,

FASTrack was pretty beneficial because the classes were smaller and with the classes being small, the teacher has more time to interact with the students individually and you actually get to know your professors rather than being in a big class lecture with a 300-people class.

Smaller classes seemed to be the one academic benefit that was agreed on by most of the students who were interviewed or surveyed.

When comparing the African American student population with the Caucasian students at this predominantly white institution, the research indicated a significant difference between the

two aforementioned populations with regards to their FASTrack experiences. While a large percentage (82.3%) of the African American students found some type of success whether academically or socially with this program, only 67.4% of the Caucasian students indicated the program helped them to be successful. However, their comments would suggest that there were some benefits gained from participating in the FASTrack cohort. One junior standing Caucasian female student who was surveyed said,

I think I was more successful with FASTrack because it allowed me to build friendships and study groups with new people. The program introduced me to life situations and how to handle them. I am thankful I got to be a part of such a good program that introduced me to such amazing people and professors.

The social aspect of FASTrack seemed to be the prevailing positive thought for both African American and Caucasian students. One Caucasian female student who was interviewed asserted,

Like I said you get to know those people really well and you form those connections. And then with those connections you form other connections through their friends and then there are the instructors and their thoughts and opinions and getting some insight on different courses and majors. With the FASTrack program and the required activities in class meetings and outside of class helped you learn more, not only about Ole Miss but Oxford too. And in doing that with people that you are already familiar with, makes it a lot easier. Especially for people that are a loner like me. I pretty much stay to myself, but then doing those things with them helped because I would not have done them by myself.

Many of the students indicated that this program built a sense of community by allowing them to feel safe and comfortable because they were able to learn new things with their fellow

FASTrack cohort students. The smaller FASTrack class setting created a sense of familiarity which allowed some students to feel less threatened in such a large environment. In addition, students revealed this smaller class setting made them feel like they were in a high school setting, something they were familiar with for the past four years.

Class size was mentioned several times in this study. Many of the students spoke about how they enjoyed the smaller class sizes. A junior standing African American female student made the following statement in her survey response,

You have classes with some of the same people every day so it'll ease you into the large lecture class process more gently. Also, if you're absent for any reason, it's easy to figure out what happened in class because you'll most likely know someone out of all of your classes.

As mentioned previously, smaller class sizes can contribute to the academic success of underrepresented students who need help transitioning from high school to a four-year institution. This idea was reaffirmed by another junior standing African American female when she replied in her survey,

Some of the benefits that I obtained from being in FASTrack was a smaller classroom setting. This provided me with the opportunity to get to know my fellow classmates as I did in high school. It also enabled me to get a personal relationship with my professors.

A personal relationship between professors and students can often be one of the factors that can help contribute to a student's academic success. For this reason, the FASTrack program at the University of Mississippi handpicks (FASTrack carefully selects instructors from each department) the instructors for the courses their students enroll in. Since FASTrack has placed a

great deal of importance in handpicking instructors, we felt it important to gauge if the students felt their EDHE instructors were knowledgeable when it comes to the University of Mississippi.

Instructors often get the blame and/or credit for student success in the classroom. In order to learn more about the student experience in the FASTrack program, it was essential to gain the students' perspectives about their instructors. African American students found the instructors to be knowledgeable at a slightly higher rate than the Caucasian students enrolled in the program. Eighty-eight percent of African American students found the instructors to be knowledgeable, while 80% of Caucasian students found them to be knowledgeable. Only 4% of African American students felt the instructors were not knowledgeable, while 10% of Caucasian students felt that way.

When the students elaborated on the knowledge of their instructors, they tended to focus on the information that assisted them in their specific academic transition at the university. One African American male student expressed during his interview,

Yes, she [his EDHE 105 instructor] was very knowledgeable. I feel as if she was knowledgeable because of her efforts being portrayed during class. She always had the right answers for questions, not only when it pertained to the classroom but when it came to real life situations.

One senior standing African American female stated in the survey,

I got a chance to be a part of classes that weren't so large and that increased the chance of developing a relationship with the professor. It allowed the professor more time to get to know the students individually. More time was able to be spent with a student individually which made it possible to go into depth when explaining lecture material during class time and meetings.

In contrast, when surveyed, a Caucasian female student expressed displeasure when asked if her instructor was knowledgeable,

No. My professor was a grad student, and he was awesome! However, as expected, he tended to prioritize his own work over us. That worked out well for us, because we didn't have to do as much work as everyone else, but we didn't get as much exposure as the other freshmen.

Although rare, there were some African American students who felt the EDHE instructors for FASTrack were less than adequate. When surveyed about whether the instructors were knowledgeable, one African American male student simply stated, “No, because we mostly didn't do much.” Each instructor is given academic freedom to instruct their class however they wish. For some students, this was problematic and they believed their instructor was less knowledgeable than the instructors of their peers. The students believed this denied them the exposure that other students experienced. However, for the majority of students surveyed, they felt the instructors were extremely knowledgeable about topics that aided in their transition to the university.

Students were asked if they felt they were more successful with FASTrack than they would have been without the program. Eighty-two percent of African American students who participated in the survey indicated that the FASTrack program helped them be successful at the University of Mississippi. Only 17.6 percent of African American students stated that they would have been successful without the program in stark contrast to the percentage of Caucasian students who felt they would have succeeded without FASTrack. Survey responses as well as individual interviews indicated that students were referring to various types of success such as academic success (GPA), career success, surviving first-year, etc.



Social Transitions seem to be the most common type of success described by African American students. “Retention theorists... contend that students are more likely to persist in college when they successfully separate from their home context and become academically and socially integrated into the college setting” (Tinto, 1993, as cited in Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007, p. 406). It appears the FASTrack academic cohort provides adequate social transitions, which can lead to student success at least based on the student responses.

### **First-Generation Students**

Just as African American students encounter challenges at institutions of higher learning, first-generation students face their own individualized set of problems while attempting to attain a bachelor’s degree. Arnold and Barratt (2015) stated,

The effects of being first generation across a large population are known, but this does not inform educators about what it is like to be a first-generation student. The difficulties that first-generation students face on their pathways to success are the interpersonal interactions and organizational structures that the ruling class on campus has created. (p. 196)

Gofen (2017) noted first-generation students face disadvantages before ever stepping onto a college campus. According to Hand and Payne (2008) “first-generation students represent a crucial population in institutions of higher education. Often considered ‘at-risk’ in academic persistence and retention discussions, these students present both a challenge and opportunity to postsecondary education” (p. 4).

Because first-generation students face similar transition barriers, it was also important to gain their perspectives about the FASTrack program. When asked if they felt the FASTrack program was beneficial, first-generation students found the program to be beneficial. Eighty-two

percent of the first-generation students surveyed found the program to be beneficial. Forty-five percent of the respondents found the program to be very beneficial while 37% found the program to be beneficial for a total of 82% of first-generation FASTrack students. Only about 4% of the first-generation students indicated that the program was not beneficial at all.

Katreovich and Aruguete (2017) noted factors which might predict success for first-generation students: high levels of support during the first year; academic preparation programs; social integration on campus; peer and family support predict higher grades and retention; increased confidence; and a sense of belonging. This sentiment was echoed in the student survey. When surveyed, one white female first-generation student with sophomore classification stated, “It's kind of a gentle push into college life. It's rigorous, but you're sort of directed into adjusting. You make contacts with people that you might not have normally and you have a better ability to make friends.”

In comparison, when surveying non-first-generation students about the benefits of the FASTrack program, it was discovered that only 33% of students felt the program was very beneficial to them. This number is 12% lower than the first-generation students in the program. Forty-seven percent of the non-first-generation students said the program was beneficial which was slightly higher than the first-generation student population. Approximately 12% of non-first-generation students found the program not beneficial at all. This number is much larger than the first-generation student population. The students that did not fall into the category of first-generation seemed to have a similar outlook on what the FASTrack program had to offer them. One African American male who was not a first-generation student who was surveyed stated that he enjoyed FASTrack because of, “Life-long friends, consistency, mentors, and

familiar faces.” Even with non-first-generation students, being a part of a community resonated with them.

During an interview with a first-generation African American male student, when asked about FASTrack being beneficial, he responded,

FASTrack was pretty beneficial because the classes were smaller and with the classes being small the teacher has more time to interact with the students individually and you actually getting to know your professors rather than being in a big class lecture in a 300-people class.

He also stated,

Basically, the small atmosphere helped me out because of the transition from high school to college. It was kind of the same with the FASTrack writing class so I felt more comfortable in getting to know people and not afraid to ask questions in front of everybody.

When comparing the first-generation student population with the non-first-generation students, the research indicated a similar experience with regards to their FASTrack experiences. More than half (54%) of the first-generation students found some type of success whether academically or socially with this program. Approximately 56% of the non-first-generation students indicated the program helped them to be successful.

One white, first-generation female student made the following statement during her interview about her favorite part of being in FASTrack,

The closeness and getting to know your other classmates. I see Ole Miss and being a dropped into a mix of students and you don't know anyone and you're new and everyone else is new and they don't know anyone so I felt like FASTrack kind of helped bring us

together and helped us form the connections we needed in our first year.” When asked why the program appealed to her, she replied, “Like I said the small class size because I came from a really small school. I only graduated with 35 other students from high school. And the teachers and the academic mentoring staff, they do a really good job of helping you stay on top of your first semester. And guiding you to whatever you need, whatever resources you’re unaware about, but they think may help you in your first year of success. That helped a lot. Because like I said nobody in my family had any experience with college. They didn’t know any advice or any of the classes that I should take or what resources I needed on campus. But my academic mentor she knew and she gave me a list of all the resources that I could possibly need. And we would have meetings and she checked in on me with my midterm grades. And that helped keep me accountable. But as far as getting immersed into Ole Miss I felt like that helped a lot with the class because we were able to share experiences and similar thoughts and feelings regarding our freshman year of college. And so that helped me to learn how to put things into a bigger perspective instead of getting overwhelmed.

Like the African American students, most of the first-generation students both Caucasian and African American, seemed to highlight social transition as a successful measure of the FASTrack program as opposed to the academic benefits. An African American male student who participated in FASTrack and later became a peer mentor, was interviewed and stated,

A lot of my students have told me they truly trusted me with some deep stuff and it was nothing where I should notify someone. But you know a lot of them they were like me. They were first-generation not necessarily having anyone here to help them. They would be considered a part of a marginalized group in one way whether they be women, black,

or Hispanic, something like that you know. They always came in with something. Each of them had something and for the ones who were willing to trust me I think there was a part of me just saying I'm not here to judge you because I'm still in college. I'm just a junior. I just want to be a supporter of you and be a resource.

Another junior African American male and first-generation student who participated in the survey was even more specific when he indicated, "Yea, it (FASTrack) helps students adjust to college. College was different environment for me being a first-generation college student."

Although fewer in number, there were students who found FASTrack to be academically beneficial. One first-generation, African American female student who was surveyed replied, FASTrack helped me to stay more focus and I was able to make friends to study with. It also kept me encourage, and informed about things that were going on on-campus. I had my highest GPA while in the FASTrack program.

While discussing being in a smaller classroom setting during an interview, a white female student made this statement about her transition to college,

I don't know I'm a real sociable person so I like being in crowds it was always just nice to come in. We would always get on a personal level with (teacher name) and be able to talk about stuff that was going on in our own lives so if we needed to instead of always going by the textbook. He was always there to be on a personal level with us.

One white male student during his interview when asked about his FASTrack class replied, "I really liked it just because it was like sort of reminded me of high school and the class size. And being in FASTrack gave me the opportunity to know your classmates a little more and more." This student graduated with only 52 people in his senior class. He also made the following statement about the group of people in his classes,

Just like I said just getting to know people and knowing their story and their background. If you needed to study with somebody in that class, then you had somebody that could help. Or you could ask them, hey do you know what's going on this week if I missed something.

When questioned about the make-up of the classroom demographics, one white female student made the following statement in her interview,

I like the diversity of it because at Ole Miss like we're totally about all diversity. That makes us unique. I've been to other universities in Mississippi. You could definitely tell they're very cliquish and very only white people live together and only black people live together. Only here (in Burns dorm) these people live together and I think it was great to have that diversity.

One first-generation, white female student when questioned during her interview if FASTrack should be comprised of a diverse student population made the following remarks,

I do feel like it should be diverse population because I feel like you can learn more through other cultures and their experiences and how their first-year experience might differ from your own. Because obviously if I'm a Muslim student experience is going to be far different especially if they are immersed in an all-white class. Because most of the time, the white students are not Muslims because they share different beliefs of stereotypes, prejudices, perceptions that they bring to the table with them. So being able to openly discuss those things and discuss problems, thoughts, feelings, and concerns in a class that would've been I felt like a more healthy way of learning and getting used to the Ole Miss campus and the community.

One African American female student made this statement during her interview about having more of a mixture of white and black kids (there were 15 white students and 5 black students) in the FASTrack classroom,

Yes, I would have liked it more if it were more divided. I just think when you are in that situation you just really just sometimes want to be like but I know this is a PWI so of course not. But also like instead of me being the minority, like in FASTrack, if they could have been more black people and less white people.

One African American female student made the following statement in her interview about how the FASTrack program helped her,

I think it did help me as an African-American student. Because even though we are a diverse university there are a lot of African-American students in FASTrack so that helped me as well. But I also made connections with my other FASTrack students who weren't African-American. But I feel like it did make me more comfortable to see people like me of the same race and ethnicity in the same program as me and also as a female too. We were around males but I'm not as comfortable with them.

When students were surveyed about the instructors' knowledge, first-generation students primarily honed in on the institutional knowledge of the professor as opposed to his or her instructional knowledge. First-generation students found the instructors to be knowledgeable at a slightly higher rate (84.7%) than the non-first-generation students (80.7%) enrolled in the program.

When the students elaborated on the knowledge of their instructors, they tended to focus on the information that assisted them in their social and academic transitions at the university. One African American female junior student expressed,

Absolutely (teacher name) was my EDHE 105 instructor and I am eternally grateful to have had him. His teaching style is very different from others because he doesn't beat around the bush, but allows you to understand that the only thing stopping you from having a successful four or more years here and stopping you from being successful is yourself.

She further expressed that her instructor, created an environment full of laughs, wisdom, respect and teamwork with each of his students that even when I see him around campus, I have the biggest smile and say hi because he has changed my life and the way I thought of myself more than he will ever know.

Regarding FASTrack professors being supportive, one African American female student made the following comment in her interview,

What's his name, (teacher name) was my sociology professor for FASTrack. I wasn't making the grades that I usually make because I was an A and B student in high school. And the first exam that we had in his class, I made a B and I was like this is not me. He made sure to send me an email right away and said you want to come in and we can talk about it? So, after every exam, I would go to him. I looked over my notes with him and asked him some questions about if this is where I would write in my notes. He helped me all throughout the program.

Similar to the African American students, the first-generation students interviewed and surveyed seemed to focus on the importance of the relationships that were built during their time in the FASTrack program. These relationships appeared to have a positive effect on the success of first-generation students. First-generation students indicated that the social aspect of the



program was the most important factors of the program. Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich and Powell (2017) made the following statement

Describing the activities, roles, relationships of successful students can present a picture of the ways in which successful students act on their environment and the environment acts upon them, guiding students toward positive college outcomes including successful transition, retention, and graduation. (p. 22)

### **Social Engagement**

Social Engagement is interacting and becoming immersed in a new environment, in this case the University of Mississippi campus and student life. Barbatis (2010) found that students participating in an academic cohort are overall more satisfied with their college experience because they were actively engaged with their professors and other students. These students reported they felt involved in collaborative learning.

Another area that might impact students' overall development was their relationships with other students. Students in learning communities form bonds with one another because of their daily interactions. Often, students form relationships with fellow cohort classmates which allows them to improve their own interpersonal skills such as verbal communication, social interaction, assertiveness, problem solving, and decision making. Johnson (2012) pointed out that students' interpersonal relationships with other students can provide positive outcomes when they occur and can impact the students' development. Students learn to interact with each and work together. They encourage one another and tend to volunteer or participate in activities that profit someone other than themselves.

## **African American Students**

Active engagement is a basic part of the college experience. On most college campuses, there are student organizations that offer a variety of special interests. However, as previously mentioned, many African American students struggle to find comfort on college campuses, which may restrict their ability for social engagement. Their discomfort on predominately white campuses makes them less likely to get involved in white-dominated organizations. Baker (2013) stated,

An important piece of this theory is that stereotype threat is situational, meaning that African American and Latino students are not affected by stereotype threat in all environments. Unfortunately, for these students, attending a predominantly white college often places students in an environment that does not encourage a sense of belonging and places them in a situation where stereotype threat often occurs. However, an environment where students of color feel welcomed and receive support from that environment may help reduce stereotype threat. Social support may aid in the reduction of stereotype threat. (p. 634)

Numerous African American students found that FASTrack helped to facilitate social engagement and helped them overcome some of the barriers they faced making a large predominately white campus seem smaller and surrounding them with peers more likely to look like and/or be facing the same challenges. In his survey, one junior African American male proclaimed,

I was able to make a bigger progress by being environmentally prepared. Rather than being exposed to the large scale (on-campus) environment, I was guided through a group of great students and companions with whom I remain friends with to this day.

On-campus engagement was not the only form of social engagement that students credited the FASTrack program for facilitation. One African American female student said that being a part of the FASTrack program helped her engage in off-campus social activities. She claimed in her interview that she learned,

How you can still go out and have fun but don't be crazy. Be safe like that. That happens cause kids from a very small town and so when I got here it's a little bit bigger. It's not as big but it's bigger and so I was kinda overwhelmed. And I was like what am I supposed to do and who am I supposed to do it with. So that helped a lot. I did go out a few times with my FASTrack classmates. It was better because I knew them and I felt safe.

Student and social activities were not the only social engagement benefits described by students. One African American male student surveyed was excited about the FASTrack program and its facilitation of student engagement that led to possibilities for career related benefits. He mentioned that the FASTrack program offered a chance for “networking and involvement in opportunities that help build my resume.” It appears that several of the African American students who were interviewed or surveyed found FASTrack beneficial from a student engagement standpoint.

### **First-Generation Students**

Similar to African American students, first-generation students also saw the value of active engagement. According to one student, this engagement was facilitated by the FASTrack professor. When asked about participating in activities outside of the classroom, one African American first-generation male student commented in his interview,

So in my class which like I said (Teacher Name) was my instructor. She pretty much often said you know you guys should stay here on the weekends and do this not necessary for a grade but just spend time together.

It seems that a gentle push from the FASTrack instructor allowed for active engagement. Some students saw the value in participation, even when it was not a mandatory requirement by the program. One white first-generation female in her interview made the following remarks about social engagement outside the classroom,

Those (outside the classroom activities) were offered and they did have an event at least once a month but those were not required to go to. I felt like some people including myself wouldn't go to because they weren't required. I think so and not just for the attendance record but just for some time students if they're anxious about something or they are the type of loner unless they're pushed to do something and try something new they're not going to because it puts them out of their comfort zone. But I do think when they do go to those activities and they see that it's actually fun, they may be more likely to get out of their shell a little bit throughout their college years.

Some FASTrack participants described their experience differently. One African American male first-generation student surveyed stated that he benefited from FASTrack because he was “forced to develop relationships with (other) students.” Another student who was a first-generation white male said in his survey that the FASTrack program guided him towards, “More involvement, higher emotional stability, better understanding of...personal relationships that last all four years.”

According to the students, the FASTrack program was integral in facilitating social engagement. Often times that facilitation was passive, but there was also some active

facilitation. The FASTrack students tended to see the push for students to be socially engaged on and off-campus as a beneficial component of the FASTrack program. Kuh (2009) indicated that the greatest impacts on personal and learning development for college-aged students include various types of in and out of class activities and these social engagement practices can benefit all students, including those students from racial/ethnic backgrounds, first-generation students, and those less prepared for college.

### **Academic Transitions**

For the purpose of this study, Academic Transition is defined as the ability of students to academically transition from a high school graduate to an incoming college freshman. These transitions may include the students' ability to reinforce effective study skills and further develop their test-taking strategies at the collegiate level. These skills may help the students persist and obtain a quality grade point average (3.0 or better) ultimately leading to a baccalaureate degree. In short, Academic Transition is adjusting to a new campus environment and developing the tools which allow students to be on par with their freshman peers who fall outside of underrepresented student populations.

### **African American Students**

In the literature review, we discussed how historical barriers, such as a lack of equal educational opportunities for African Americans, caused them to be at a disadvantage academically when enrolling in college. Many students attended inferior schools and were often underprepared when enrolling in college (Beasley & Holly, 2013). Because of this fact, it is extremely important for institutions to break down barriers in the academic arena. The FASTrack program has stated that its students “earn higher GPAs and go on academic probation less often” (University of Mississippi, 2016). However, the students who participated in the

surveys and interviews did not believe that the FASTrack program was the reason for their high grade point averages. They felt the program failed to teach them the skills they needed for academic success in college. During an interview with an African American female continuing generation student, she expressed her need for study skills when she stated,

No, not really. I struggled a lot. My lowest grade my fall semester of freshman year was college algebra because I've felt like I didn't do really good on a lot of it because I didn't know how to study, or do my homework.

The need for study skills were mentioned multiple times during interviews and surveys which is why academic transitions emerged as a finding during this research.

Study skills were not the only academic issue that students felt that was lacking with the FASTrack program. Although many students viewed FASTrack as a dynamic program for social transitions, they felt that it hindered their academic progression. This is because FASTrack has a policy that all students must take freshman writing, even if they have taken it prior due to dual enrollment or at a community college. In fact, when discussing FASTrack, one African American male senior student was adamant in survey response about how the program impeded his academic progress. He stated, "No, it (FASTrack) forced me to take some courses I already had credit for again versus me just going straight ahead to the next steps. I still will be graduating on time, however." This was the basis for one of our proposed program changes to the FASTrack academic cohort. Many students felt FASTrack was the cause of an academic barrier because of the repetition of coursework.

### **First-Generation Students**

First-generation students must overcome barriers similar to those of African American students face. First-generation students, like their African American peers, also mentioned study

skills as a deficiency for the FASTrack program. One first-generation white female student who was interviewed made the following statements about deficiencies,

I didn't know how to study when I came to college because my school that I graduated from basically was just with memorization you know. You study a little stuff like vocabulary words and that's what your test was on. You really didn't have to do much in my school to really learn so I didn't know how to study when I got to Ole Miss and learning how to study and learning the different ways that each professor teaches and the way that they test is different. So they (other FASTrack students) thought what would work for studying for one professor's test would for the other one but it wouldn't work for the next. And it didn't and they got caught up in that and they struggled with that so I felt like giving more resources not just the Sis (supplemental instruction) sessions. I felt like it would help them do better as far as their grade way goes. Teaching them how to study and actually incorporating the study skills not just list them all in a classroom and then expect them to do it. I feel like if we had had more study groups available to them would help.

Some students also viewed FASTrack negatively because it had an adverse effect on their academic progress. When asked if they found the FASTrack program beneficial academically, both first-generation and second-generation students seemed to have similar views. One first-generation white female student who was surveyed stated, "No, because of the program I had to retake courses I had AP credits for and I wasted a semester sitting around." This sentiment was echoed during an interview with another sophomore white female who was a second-generation student. She stated,

I did enjoy my experience with FASTrack, but I have one complaint. In high school, I took Writing 101 through dual enrollment. I was forced to retake it through FASTrack. I understand the concept was to have multiple classes with the same students, but I don't think it was fair to have to retake a class I already had. That was time and money wasted that could've been spent on a class I didn't already have. Also, I came out with a B in the class, lowering my GPA although I had an A the first time I took it. I don't know if there's anything that can be done about this, but that is one issue I had with the program. Other than that it was a great experience.

It was clear throughout the surveys and interviews that most of the students felt “let down” academically and one of the biggest frustrations was with the retaking of completed coursework. One African American male student agreed when he stated, "No, some of my credits from high school could not transfer because of it (FASTrack)." The most consistent academic benefit students across populations in our study highlighted was the smaller class sizes.

Academic Transitions was deemed to be an important component for students. However, according to the students, the FASTrack program was not sufficient in providing the necessary skills needed for continued success in college. Furthermore, students felt delayed by the policy that forced many of them to retake courses. In order for FASTrack to adequately serve all students, it must be more than a socially beneficial program. The students felt there should be major changes to Academic Transitions to improve success for FASTrack student populations.

### **Notable Takeaway**

One takeaway from the research was the discovery of commonalities in student responses. As researchers, differences were expected when analyzing responses from interviews and surveys. However, this research yielded surprisingly uniform results. African American and



first-generation students provided similar answers to the majority of the questions and clear themes emerged.

During the research findings, both African American students and first-generation students gave similar responses in regards to what aspects of the program they found most useful and what areas needed changes or improvement. We believe that these commonalities in responses happened for two reasons. The first reason was because the students believed that the FASTrack program offered the same, almost identical, benefits to each student who participated in the program. The second reason was because there are many students that fall into both demographics and therefore have many of the same issues/needs. Many of the first-generation students were African American. As indicated earlier, approximately 57% of African American students identified as first-generation. Because these students fell into both populations, the findings yielded similar responses in some cases. This is not an uncommon phenomenon. “Examples of the struggles of first-generation students can be found in all classes of society but are most often found in low socioeconomic groups and minorities, particularly Hispanics and African Americans” (Hand & Payne, 2008, as cited in Gladieux & Watson, 2000; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996, p. 4). Because first-generation and African American students face similar struggles, this gives us an indication of why so many responses were similar.

### **Discussion**

The conceptual framework for our research was centered on student development. Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development-The Seven Vectors and Schlossberg’s Transition Theory gave us a blueprint to help design research questions around our problem of practice. The focus on breaking down barriers for underrepresented students stemmed from Schlossberg’s

transition theory which provides an in-depth look at an individual's transitions. Since transitions can be influenced by a person's environment, we felt it pertinent to research how underrepresented students felt about their learning environment, in this case the FASTrack learning community, when transitioning from high school to college.

As scholar-practitioners, we found it pertinent to look at how institutions of higher learning were allocating resources to break down barriers for underrepresented students. Ethically, colleges and universities are responsible for giving every student a chance for success. Each student who enrolls should have a fair chance of attaining the social mobility that a college diploma can offer. "The gap between underrepresented minority students and other groups is particularly detrimental because it affects individual long-term social mobility" (Carter, 2006, p. 33).

Academic cohorts are programs that many institutions use as an attempt to alleviate barriers and provide an equitable path to degree completion for underrepresented students. As scholar-practitioners, it is important to understand that just because a program exists, does not mean it is efficient. Researching academic cohorts allows us to review these colleges and universities attempts at social justice. Although social injustices have been present for many years, it is time for higher education institutions to make drastic changes. It is extremely important for all stakeholders to take an ethical stance in which we will do everything possible to move this nation forward towards equality for all student populations through the use of education.

### **Assumptions and Complications**

As researchers, we had many assumptions going into our study. Prior to our research, we assumed that academic benefits would be the predominant reward for students that participated

in academic cohorts. However, the research from surveys and interviews we collected indicate that FASTrack was more socially beneficial from the students' perspective. Furthermore, we assumed that the students who were interviewed knew the definition of a first-generation student, but in fact, they did not even identify as a first-generation student until we presented them with the definition. We also assumed that institutional research data would provide us with comparable grade point averages for FASTrack and non FASTrack students. However, the data had too many inconsistencies and variables for which we could not account.

The research also produced some complications. We found it extremely hard to find a white male first-generation student to interview at a predominantly white institution. If not for a recommendation from the FASTrack program, we would not have located a student to be interviewed. Another complication was time. The interviews and surveys had to be conducted before the end of the school year so that we did not lose students to graduation or due to the completion of the academic term.

The purpose of this research was to explore the potential efficacy of the Foundations for Academic Success Track (FASTrack) academic cohort program at the University of Mississippi and its service of such programs to meet the needs of underrepresented student populations. We sought to answer the following questions: According to students' perceptions, can learning communities provide measurable rewards in regard to overall student satisfaction, increased social interaction, and other long-term benefits? Do students believe academic cohorts positively influence their grade point averages and provide positive social and academic transitions?

### **Academic Cohorts: Measurable Rewards**

The qualitative research indicated that the FASTrack academic cohort program provided measurable rewards. From the students' perspectives, the program was considered satisfactory

overall. Nearly 81% of the FASTrack students surveyed indicated that they found the program to be beneficial, indicating that overall the students did garner value from the program.

Social transition was the most beneficial part of the FASTrack program, according to the students surveyed. The program facilitated a smooth transition from high school to college for the majority of the students who participated in the cohort. As previously mentioned, students found success because the FASTrack program allowed them to make social connections with other students as well as some of their instructors. The research indicated that students found a community within the FASTrack program which helped alleviate some of the traditional freshman barriers (homesickness, loneliness, lack of connection to campus, etc.). The students reported that they made friends more easily because of the program and that the program gave them a safe space that eased their transition into college life. From the students' point of view, FASTrack definitely provided measurable rewards and overall student satisfaction.

### **Academic Cohorts: Academic Benefits**

The FASTrack students surveyed did not perceive the program as helping their grade-point averages. Many students dismissed the idea that the cohort was responsible for their academic success. Although students spoke fondly of their professors and instructors, they felt that their academic success could not be attributed to the FASTrack program. Based on the responses in the survey, only 8.6% of first-generation students and 11% of African American students found FASTrack to help academically. This could indicate that the FASTrack academic cohort program did not break down the academic barriers for the underrepresented student populations or it could simply be that the students did not see the social connections they made with their faculty (who may have provided assistance to them outside the classroom) or with their fellow peers (if they studied with fellow cohort members) as directly impacting their

academic achievement. Social transitions are likely viewed as a positive benefit for students by university administrators. However, grade point averages are measured and recorded by universities and one would assume that academic transitions which would directly affect retention, persistence, and graduation, are far more important to university administrators than social transitions.

### **Summary**

Academic cohorts have the potential to be one of the change agents for correcting some of the barriers faced by underrepresented students. In this manuscript, we reviewed whether the FASTrack academic cohorts could reduce the barriers faced by underrepresented students at the University of Mississippi. The FASTrack program was selected because of its highly publicized success.

The research focused on the students' perceptions of the FASTrack program. The primary focus was underrepresented student populations within the FASTrack program. Did the FASTrack program provide measurable rewards for underrepresented students? The research indicated that it did provide measurable rewards. However, the rewards, according to the students, were not academic in nature. While some students verbalized academic benefits from FASTrack, the majority of students interviewed perceived their experience as more socially than academically. Does this mean that the FASTrack program failed at its mission? The FASTrack academic cohort program claims that the program helps first-year students transition from high school to college. According to our research, it definitely lives up to that claim as students were largely in agreement in how it helped them socially transition to the University of Mississippi. The FASTrack program also claims that participating students earn higher grade-point averages. We could neither substantiate nor refute this claim, but the students seemed to think that their

academic success was not because of FASTrack. As scholar-practitioners, what does this mean going forward?

The University of Mississippi is in a unique situation. It is the flagship institution in a state where education ranks near the bottom. It is the mission of most state universities to provide their state with an educated population. Since Mississippi has the highest percentage of African Americans of any state, there is a need for quality programs that help underrepresented student populations. Easing the social transition is an excellent component of FASTrack. However, the university still has two issues that must be solved. First, the university must find a way to help students overcome the academic barriers within the academic cohort. Second, the university must expand the program, or create something similar for all underrepresented students.

As scholar-practitioners, it is our job to help search for solutions when we discover problems. As stakeholders at the University of Mississippi, we will attempt to offer solutions to help the university create programming that will further assist underrepresented students. This programming will be designed to help underrepresented students overcome both social and academic barriers. In the next manuscript, a plan for implementation and dissemination will be presented.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **IMPLEMENTATION AND DISSEMINATION**

#### **Summary of the Problem of Practice**

The purpose of this research was to explore the potential efficacy of the Foundations for Academic Success Track (FASTrack) academic cohort program at the University of Mississippi in meeting the needs of underrepresented student populations. We wanted to learn more about students' perceptions of whether participation in these academic cohort communities contributed to overall student satisfaction, increased social interaction, and provided other long-term benefits? Do African American and first-generation students believe academic cohorts positively influence their grade point averages and provide positive social and academic transitions? A review of the literature gave a historical snapshot into why there was a significant need for programs similar to academic cohorts. It also reviewed why underrepresented student populations have a significant amount of barriers when trying to complete a college degree. The literature provided us with the historical significance needed to ultimately craft the problem of practice and conduct research to better understand the problem and potential solutions.

The conceptual framework for our research was centered on student development in order to find solutions for breaking down barriers for underrepresented students. Chickering's Theory of Identity Development and Schlossberg's Transition Theory gave us a template to better

understand students' needs during transitional periods (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). We felt it pertinent to research how underrepresented students who were part of an academic cohort program felt about their experiences transitioning from high school to college, including what was and was not beneficial to their postsecondary transition. Ethically, colleges and universities are responsible for giving each student a fair chance of attaining the social mobility that a college diploma can offer.

Social injustices have been present for many years. College and university administrators should provide an equitable path to degree completion for underrepresented students. It is time for higher education institutions to make significant changes to provide equality for all student populations through the use of education.

Throughout the research process, we realized that the conceptual framework of student development does not require significant modification. The developmental theories maintain their significance in identifying student development needs. However, many of the programs, such as academic cohorts, centered on those developmental theories, should be examined to see whether the program components meet the needs of the participating students. The underrepresented population is changing and by examining students' perceptions and experiences, we believe academic cohort programs can be tweaked to better support students to persist and earn their baccalaureate degree.

### **Collections Methods and Analysis**

Data was collected from the Office of Institutional Research at the University of Mississippi during the 2016-2017 academic year from a survey distributed via the Qualtrics program. Additionally, face-to-face interviews were conducted with FASTrack students to gain



a better understanding of students' insights. Analysis of the qualitative interview data in combination with the survey data revealed common themes.

There are several limitations that must be recognized for this study. As stated in manuscript two, students who are no longer enrolled at the university cannot be surveyed or interviewed. Our research was limited to first-generation, African American, and Caucasian FASTrack students. Other ethnic minorities were not included, and could have different perceptions than those in our study. We also limited the study to FASTrack participants, which is just one of many academic cohort programs at the University of Mississippi. Additional limitations include the fact that both researchers have previously taught at least one FASTrack course and are current employees. Finally, we began the study with the intention of using quantitative data obtained from Institutional Research to gain a better understanding of how FASTrack affected student GPAs. We were unable to include the data once we realized students were erroneously labeled as FASTrack students in the university's student database and that the comparison group contained too many confounding variables to make a meaningful comparison.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Academic cohorts could be one of the change agents for correcting some of the barriers faced by underrepresented students. In this manuscript, we reviewed whether one academic cohort program could reduce the barriers faced by underrepresented students at the University of Mississippi. The FASTrack program was selected because of its highly publicized success.

The research focused on perceptions of the FASTrack program, primarily focusing on participating underrepresented students. Did the FASTrack program provide measurable rewards for underrepresented students? The research indicated that it did provide measurable rewards. However, the rewards, according to the students, were not academic in nature. The

majority of students claimed they benefited socially more than academically from this program. Although some said they received academic rewards, the percentage was very low. What does this mean? Does it mean that the FASTrack program failed at its mission? The FASTrack academic cohort program claims that the program helps first-year students transition from high school to college. According to our research, it definitely lives up to that claim. Successful social transition was the resounding theme from the students who were interviewed and surveyed. The FASTrack program also claimed that students earn higher grade-point averages. We could neither substantiate nor refute this claim, but the students seem to think that their academic success was not because of FASTrack. As scholar-practitioners, what does this mean going forward?

The University of Mississippi is in a unique situation. It is the flagship institution in a state where education ranks near the bottom. It is the mission of most state universities to provide their state with an educated population. Since Mississippi has the highest percentage of African Americans of any state, there is a need for quality programs that help underrepresented student populations. Easing the social transition is an excellent component of FASTrack. However, the university still has two issues that must be solved. First, the university must find a way to help students overcome the academic barriers within the academic cohort. Second, the university must expand the program, or create something similar for all underrepresented students.

## **Policy Changes**

### **Institutional Policy Changes**

The University of Mississippi will need to enact several policy changes to meet the needs for further development of the underrepresented student populations. The timeline for

implementing all the following changes would be during the 2019-2020 academic school year. Although retention has been a focus for the university, there are no clear plans for the retention of underrepresented students. As individuals who have been involved directly in retention efforts at the University of Mississippi, we have discovered that there is only a broad-based retention plan and not one that focuses on specific underserved populations.

The current university retention plan focuses on retaining students categorized in the freshman cohort. These are first-time college freshmen who enroll during the fall semester. This retention plan includes: monitoring absences, checking to make sure each student has a full-time schedule, contacting students who appear on the university's at-risk student list, and the use of professional advising in the Center for Student Success and First-Year Experience. This plan does not specifically target any particular student population, and thus does not specifically focus on the needs of underrepresented students as described in the research.

Students from low-income, minority, or first-generation backgrounds are more likely to dropout, struggle academically, and take longer to graduate than other groups (Barbatis, 2010). To foster success for these student populations and to prevent students from leaving the university before achieving their degree, it is critical to provide nurturance, encouragement, and assistance to these individuals. In addition, colleges and universities should not assume all student populations nor each student within the population require the same type of resources and support.

During the data collection process, many students expressed their displeasure with some of the academic components of the FASTrack program. They revealed that the program often thwarted their academic progress because they were required to retake some courses for which they possessed prior college credit, such as dual enrollment (a course taken from a college while

in high school) courses. One student further detailed that earning a lower grade in a course she already had credit for lowered her GPA rather than helping to raise it, as the program purports to do.

### **Recommended FASTrack Program Policy Changes**

#### **Academic Changes**

The first recommended policy change will allow students to progress academically without retaking already completed coursework. The current FASTrack policy requires the students to take freshman writing together, even if they had previously completed the course. We have mentioned several times the barriers that underrepresented students face. Slowing the progress of an at-risk student population is not the optimal way to break down the existing barriers. In fact, it actually raises a new barrier for those students. For example, having to retake a course can cause a student to have additional costs. This could place additional financial hardship on the student and their families.

In order to accommodate students who have previously completed college coursework, FASTrack should create cohort sections for students who meet these criteria. This will allow those students to share in the positive benefits of FASTrack without slowing their academic progress. For example, FASTrack could create some WRIT 102 courses for the fall semester for those students who have previously completed WRIT 101. This would allow the students to benefit from the cohort both socially and academically. Just a simple modification such as this, would provide immediate student satisfaction and not impede a student's progress toward graduating in four years. The budget implications for this change will be minimal as FASTrack co-ops currently employed writing instructors. Therefore, FASTrack would not have to pay the cost of new instructors for WRIT 102.

Studying for high school and studying for college are often very different. Many students stated that they rarely studied in high school and never developed the necessary study skills for being successful on college examinations. Because of this, we recommend that the FASTrack program create study skills and test-taking workshops. These workshops will expand on the basic study skills and test-taking knowledge introduced in the EDHE 105 course. The workshop should include several types of note-taking strategies, as to avoid the same generic methods that may not appeal to every student. Although many of the EDHE 105 instructors teach this lecture, it does not allow for an in-depth review of which note-taking strategy fits the individual student. These workshops would help the students develop skills that will extend beyond freshman year.

The test-taking strategies workshop is extremely important for college students. The workshop should include basic strategies on how to take a test: such as how to answer essay questions, how to approach multiple choice questions, etc. Also, the workshop should include sessions on dealing with test anxiety, a common challenge for freshmen students. Lastly, we would recommend the test-taking workshop be combined with the study skills workshop so the students can be tested on the information given in the study skills workshop allowing for application based learning.

The academic workshops for study skills and test-taking would give the students the academic components they felt were lacking in the FASTrack program. These additions, along with changes in the curriculum, could make the FASTrack program more well-rounded and more academically beneficial to participating students.

The cost for this improvement would be minimal because FASTrack could utilize their current Academic Mentors and other faculty members that teach EDHE 105. This would require some restructuring of how they use their time in their current roles. The workshops would

require some financial burden, as FASTrack would need to purchase study and test-taking materials.

### **Academic Advising**

Academic advising is a crucial component to student success. Often a great advisor is more than just a person who tells you what courses to take each semester in order to graduate. Academic advisors often build a personal relationship with students that allow them to get to know what is going on in class and outside of class. This is referred to as holistic advising. In a lot of cases, an academic advisor is a student's most trusted person on campus.

The FASTrack Advisor was well adored by the students. However, many of them said that it was tough to connect with her because the advisor was often too busy with other students. In this situation, the advisor is not at fault. The lack of availability for the students stems from one advisor being overworked. Because of this, we would recommend that FASTrack consider hiring at least one additional advisor to serve the students. One advisor is not enough to adequately meet the needs of the current students. In a program such as this, holistic advising is required and it is also important for the advisor to be connected and up-to-date on changes across majors, which requires time. If the FASTrack program could hire another advisor, the quality of the program would improve and better meet the support needs of the students. In addition, the academic advisors need to have the students build connections with their non-FASTrack academic advisors throughout their freshman year. The cost of a new academic advisor would be \$35,394. This is the minimum salary for an academic advisor as listed on the University of Mississippi Human Resources webpage (University of Mississippi, 2017).

## **Second Year: Sophomores Get Lost**

Many students expressed concerns about getting lost as a sophomore. The FASTrack program is extremely structured and they have people who constantly check up on them. However, during sophomore year, they go from having extreme structure to nothing at all. Although the students were completely against an identical second year, they expressed the desire to have some parts of the program available during their sophomore year. For this reason, we recommend that the FASTrack program implement a second-year monitoring system.

The second-year monitoring system would include social and academic components. The social component would allow students to stay connected. The FASTrack program would need to sponsor a few lunches and a few social gatherings. This would be optional for the students, but it would be a way for the students to make connections with their peers and with the FASTrack staff. They could also invite the first-year FASTrack students and make it mandatory that they attend. Inviting currently enrolled FASTrack alumni would help encourage student engagement and social networking.

The academic component would involve grade monitoring. The academic mentors would check midterm and final grades during both semesters and make contact with students who are deemed at-risk to discuss possible solutions. This process could greatly help sophomore retention and help the students feel that they were not lost in the shuffle after freshman year.

The cost for the social component would be minimal as FASTrack would only have to pay for food. There is no cost to reserve space on campus for a university sponsored event. There is no cost for the academic component because grade monitoring is already in the job description for academic advisors, and if another academic advisor were hired, this duty could easily be added.

## **Program Recruitment**

Recruiting is the lifeblood of any program. However, according to the students, FASTrack recruiting was woefully inadequate. Many students stated that there was no formal recruitment to the FASTrack program. The majority of students learned about the program by word of mouth from previous FASTrack participants. The lack of a formal recruiting process prohibits FASTrack from reaching underserved student populations, when in fact, these populations have the potential to benefit the most from the program.

In order to solve this problem, FASTrack should utilize the Regional Admissions Counselors to help recruit for the FASTrack program. The Admissions Counselors are in contact with prospective students and could notify high school guidance counselors and students about this program. FASTrack could provide a brochure that could be given out during school visits and college fairs. This would raise the visibility of the program and allow for proper dissemination of program materials. The cost of recruiting would be minimal and only require proper coordination and the purchase of program brochures.

A second possible solution which requires funding would be the creation of a FASTrack recruiter. This person could travel with the Admissions Counselors to various high schools and discuss the benefits of the FASTrack program. The recruiter would need to build relationships with high school counselors to determine if any African American or first-generation students would be a viable candidate for the FASTrack program. In addition, this individual could also participate in some of the campus tours which take place on a daily basis. These few steps could greatly increase the availability of this program to underserved student populations.



## **Intervention Action as Instructor - Sovent**

The data revealed in the research findings caused me to review what I do as an instructor of FASTrack. As a scholar-practitioner, we must always look for ways to improve higher education. In this case, personal improvement can also improve the FASTrack program. The data revealed a need for more outside of the class interaction and the need for more help with academic transitions. As an instructor, I can do a better job of facilitating efforts to help in both areas.

Fink and Hummel (2015) noted that students from disadvantaged backgrounds need to feel a sense of belonging to the institution, to form close bonds with other students, and to become active learners in the campus community. Outside the class interaction can be helpful for students who are naturally introverts. If you make these interactions outside of class optional, then many introverted students may choose to skip. However, if you make these interactions mandatory, it could potentially help those introverted students make friends. “How individuals perceive their experience of activities, roles, and relationships influences their development” (Demetriou, Meece, Eaker-Rich & Powell, 2017, p. 20). Connecting students to campus by providing more out of class opportunities could increase students’ self-confidence and desire to complete their degree. Each of these characteristics/traits can be found in a learning community environment. As an instructor, I have always been hesitant to require many activities outside of the classroom. However, according to the research, the students prefer group activities with people with which they are familiar. It allows them to get to know other students and make deeper connections with them. I can help facilitate these actions through my EDHE 105 class and challenge other FASTrack instructors to do the same.

Academic transitions seemed to be lacking according to the research data. As an instructor, this is problematic. Success in academics is extremely important and should be among the most important components of this program and it was disheartening to hear students say that this component is virtually nonexistent. As an instructor, I must identify ways to improve these academic transitions. Students surveyed and interviewed mentioned needing more help with study skills, which includes how to study and how to take notes in college courses. As an EDHE 105 instructor, I cover these topics but I now realize that I can make a better effort to strengthen those lectures and accompanying assignments, and in doing so, help students transition better academically.

### **Intervention Action as Instructor - Kim**

As an instructor in the FASTrack program, this research took on an even more substantial role in my future teaching endeavors. As an instructor and a life-long learner, I am constantly seeking ways to improve my teaching techniques, encouraging connection building in my classroom between the students and myself, and searching for methods to make learning exciting and fun. In my opinion, a good instructor is always trying to improve themselves and their teaching skills. Therefore, the findings in this research allowed me to analyze my classroom management and teaching styles.

I discovered there are areas for improvement. For example, I must learn to listen to all student voices and reaffirm that each person in the classroom has a voice and needs the opportunity to speak. We all have a lesson to learn. We can each learn from another person's life experiences. Even college-aged students have influences in their past which impacts their decision to attend college and influences their motivation to graduate. Also, their family dynamics and support group can shape their college development and learning.

When each person shares their story, I, as the instructor, need to listen for clues that may reveal their socioeconomic status, their parents' educational levels, and the students own collegiate educational challenges. These clues can provide insight and alter my lesson plan for the day and/or the semester. The first-generation student may be unearthed during these discussions. The student who is barely making the grade in class may be revealed. These clues can become valuable components impacting my ability to mentor, encourage, support, and provide guidance to each student.

Each student needs to feel as though they have someone who can help them be successful. I can be the individual who helps to bridge that gap. I should make myself more readily available and more easily accessible to all student populations especially the first-generation and non-traditional student populations since I have been in their shoes and can provide tips and strategies to help them obtain their educational goals. "When faced with obstacles, first-generation students may have few outlets for social support since their family members often lack understanding of the university environment" (Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017, p. 40).

By becoming more available and accessible within and outside the classroom, I can discover areas in which students are struggling academically and socially. I need to expose ways in which I, and others on our campus, can become more actively involved socially with underrepresented students in ways which do not make the students feel even more segregated. Katreovich and Aruguete, noted, "Being separated from family and feeling a low sense of belongingness on campus, first-generation students may quickly feel marginalized. Thus, social integration must be included in programs aimed at improving performance in first-generation students" (2017, p. 42). Hand and Payne (2008) declared,

Rather, there should be a special effort to understand first-generation college students in a holistic way, recognizing the extra pressures that they may face in persisting in college. When college instructors, advisors and administrators are committed to a deeper understanding of the complexity of a first-generation college student's experience, they are prepared to take practical steps to help them. (p. 14-15)

To become more actively involved, I hope to participate in more student organizations or possibly become a leader or mentor to first-generation and non-traditional students. Perhaps, I should create, organize, and administer a first-generation and/or non-traditional organization on campus where students can receive answers to some of their questions, get encouragement from someone who has been through the same struggles, or create an environment where these student populations can gather with other students with the same background and feel a sense of community outside the classroom. Johnson (2012) measured a sense of belonging based on students having a fondness for their community and feeling a connection to campus.

Social development is often a result of a student's sense of belonging to the campus and connection with peers. A sense of belonging is created when students feel a strong connection, deep affection, or close personal association with fellow classmates. Smith (2015) noted that peer networks formed in college can also positively impact the student's entire overall college experience. Katreovich and Aruguete (2017) stated, "Academic preparedness and contact with faculty members predicted college success for first-generation students. Our results suggest that universities should continue to develop and test programs that bolster academic skills while simultaneously improving the social environment for first-generation students" (p. 40). I hope to be a larger part of fostering that sense of belonging and connection for my students.

## **New Efforts**

The implementation of new policies and procedures takes a lot of support and involvement from all stakeholders. At the University of Mississippi, the stakeholders may include but are not limited to: The Office of the Chancellor, Office of the Provost, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, FASTrack program, faculty, and staff. It may also require the development of new partnerships and programs. There are several ways that stakeholders can be involved and we will focus on the following: Faculty and Staff Mentorship Program, Academic Cohort Program Collaboration, New Cohort Program Development and new professional development opportunities.

### **Underrepresented Faculty and Staff Mentorship Program**

Students encounter the faculty and staff daily on campus. However, underrepresented students often struggle to find people that “look like them”. Therefore, we believe that the University of Mississippi should create a school sponsored mentorship program for underrepresented students in which faculty and staff are encouraged to participate. “Academic integration activities might include faculty – student interaction over course material, access to research experiences, use of tutoring centers, and the like. Social integration concerns the establishment of friendship with peers and mentorship with faculty and staff” (Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017, p. 40).

The creation of the mentorship program must begin with the hiring of a coordinator. This coordinator would recruit current members of the faculty and staff to participate in this campus wide program. The coordinator will also create and maintain a database of faculty and staff mentors, as well as a list of students participating in the Faculty and Staff Mentor program. This list will be made available to both faculty and staff mentors and current students in an effort to

help each population identify program participants with similar backgrounds. This will provide opportunities for the establishment of personal growth relationships between mentors and students. It is the job of the coordinator to facilitate interactions with social gatherings and other relationship building activities.

### **Program Collaboration between Academic Cohort Programs**

The FASTrack program is not the only academic cohort program on campus. The Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College (SMBHC) and the LuckyDay Success Program are two of the largest academic cohort programs on campus. Each of these programs provide their own unique academic cohort experience. Although separate, it is important for these programs to collaborate in an effort to learn from each other and to keep making improvements.

Some of the FASTrack participants are also members of the LuckyDay Success Program. However, there is no crossover or communication between the two programs. These programs could combine resources to better serve the students. The SMBHC and the LuckyDay Success Program also have students who participate in both programs. Because of the FASTrack policy, there are no SMBHC students in the FASTrack program.

Collaboration will increase the amount of program offerings in order to better serve a larger number of students. Discussions among the program coordinators will allow for more creativity. Interactions between Honors College, LuckyDay, and FASTrack students can create opportunities for more productive study sessions, build a sense of community outside the students own academic cohort program, and bring about a new collection of study techniques.

## **Creation of New Programs for Other Underserved Student Populations**

### **Recommendations Inspired by the Research**

**Non-Traditional Students.** Because of the discoveries in this research, meeting the needs of other underserved populations on our campus has become an area of utmost importance. One such population which is often underserved is the non-traditional student. Chen (2017) stated, “In the discourse on diversity in colleges and universities in the United States, an often-neglected population is nontraditional adult learners” (p. 1). Just like first-generation and African American students, non-traditional students face their own set of barriers and challenges. According to Grabowski, Rush, Ragen, Fayard, and Watkins-Lewis (2016) institutions of higher learning should find ways to prioritize intervention and prevention programs so these barriers are alleviated for non-traditional students.

Some of the barriers which non-traditional students face include domestic responsibilities, financial stresses, child care responsibilities, employment demands, and length of degree completion (Grabowski et al., 2016). This is not an exhaustive list; it is in fact just the tip of the stressful collegiate iceberg for a non-traditional student. Creating a conducive learning environment for underrepresented students requires immediate action and should be considered high on the list of priorities by most higher education institutions. However, most colleges and universities spend the crux of their retention efforts geared toward the traditional student between the ages of 18-22, living on campus, and enrolled full-time. Colleges and universities must realize that this is no longer the only student population on their campus which needs attention.

In our opinion, we do not believe the University of Mississippi is doing everything it should to help non-traditional students be successful. Non-traditional students can encompass a wide variety of students. This at-risk of dropping out early, student population may include adult workers, single parents, students with independent classification, individuals with delayed enrollment status, part-time students, students who do not have strong support groups at home, or other title outside the traditional student age (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

An academic cohort program created very similar to the FASTrack program could greatly benefit non-traditional students on our campus. Granted, creating a new program would cause some budget concerns and expenses. However, we feel creating an equal learning environment for all student populations outweighs any and all cost concerns.

According to Chen (2017) “To meet the learning needs of NALs (non-traditional adult learners), it is necessary to understand the nature of their diversity, who they are, and why they decide to enroll” (p. 4). Non-traditional students do not have the same educational goals as other traditional students on campus. This non-traditional student population realizes an education provides an even more beneficial reward than just a degree obtainment. It will increase their productivity and wage-earning capability in the workforce. This, in turn, leads to a better way of life for the student, as well as their families. Non-traditional students want to graduate from college as quickly as possible so they can rapidly return to the workforce and provide financial security for their family (Grabowski et al., 2016). Yet, on our campus, taking classes is not always achievable in a timely fashion.

Sadly, we do not offer enough courses for the non-traditional student outside the normal schedule. Most of our classes are offered Monday through Friday during the working hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. We do offer a limited number of online courses however; we do not offer



a fully achievable online degree program. This is a disservice to many non-traditional student populations.

In addition, all of our academic support service departments are open during the same business hours. How is this adequately serving our non-traditional student population who typically works during the day and desires to take courses after their workday? Sadly, it does not benefit them unless they are enrolled in a limited few majors on our campus. If these students are working all day, when do they have time to travel to the Office of the Bursar or Office of Financial Aid to ask questions? When should they schedule their appointments with their academic advisors? If the only time they can meet with anyone is during their work day, the non-traditional student will have to request time off from work or lose pay just to handle their campus business. These services should be offered at different times so more students can benefit. In fact, Chen (2017) noted, “When stress related to adult role conflict arises, NALs (non-traditional adult learners) feel isolated from what they feel is a youth-centric environment that does not understand them or attempt to accommodate them” (p. 4). In our opinion, the University of Mississippi should take measures to accommodate and understand this underserved and overlooked student population.

Because of the similarity of needs between non-traditional, first-generation, and African American students, academic cohorts can be a viable solution. Granted, learning community environments will not solve all the problems, but they will start the process of better serving all student populations and provide an environment in which students can find commonalities and support. To continue making improvements, higher education will need to focus on other bold changes that will serve the non-traditional student.

**Remedial Cohort.** The State of Mississippi requires that all state universities maintain identical admissions standards for resident students. Because of this, there are a significant number of students that will enroll that require remedial courses. The courses are in place to help underprepared students acquire skills that they did not receive prior to enrolling. This is problematic for a couple of reasons. First, the remedial courses do not count towards a degree. Therefore, the students have wasted time and money taking these courses. Second, the remedial students are mostly shut out from participating in many of the academic cohort programs like FASTrack. This means that the students that need help the most, are not getting it.

All students can benefit from academic and social transitions. Creating a cohort for students enrolled in remedial courses could help them gain a sense of belonging. It is possible that these students could feel embarrassed when associating with their peers because they are in fear of other students discovering that they are in remedial classes. Lavin and Weininger (1998) as cited in Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006 stated,

Supporters of college remediation draw attention to the fact that students of color, students from less affluent families, and students for whom English is a second language are greatly overrepresented in remedial courses. Consequently, policies that prevent students who need remedial/developmental work from enrolling in four-year colleges could greatly reduce the likelihood that such students would ever obtain bachelor's degrees. (p. 87)

An academic cohort program could provide students with the social and academic transitions that put them on the pathway to progression of a college degree. The university should not ignore some of its most vulnerable students. It is time to help these students, by giving them the same skills needed to navigate the flagship institution in the state of Mississippi.

## **Personal and Professional Roles and Responsibilities – Sovent**

My identity as a professional has changed tremendously. During the research process, I realized that I needed to be a bigger advocate for African American and first-generation students. As an advisor, I treat all my students the same and I give them my maximum effort. However, this research has reminded me that I need to do more for my underrepresented students. This has led to the revelation that I need to make a change in my current role.

Going forward, I would like to like to play a bigger role and become a mentor for underrepresented students. Specifically, I would like to create and lead the faculty and staff mentorship program. This program will allow me the opportunity to be extremely active in improving the lives of underrepresented students. As the coordinator of the mentorship program I would organize the faculty and staff mentors around campus. I will keep the mentor list updated and make it available to the underrepresented students.

The demand for mentors for underrepresented students cannot be overstated. The need for role models is extremely important. It allows underrepresented students to see that collegiate success can be attained because someone with a similar background has overcome barriers to achieve a college degree. Fink and Hummel (2015) stated,

One example of facilitating this connection is by connecting underserved students to role models and mentors who not only provide a personal illustration of success but also share some common experiences or identities with their mentees. Some students from these underserved populations may enter postsecondary education without familial role models or examples of higher education achievement from their precollege experiences. Learning communities have a great potential to provide role models in a meaningful way to connect students to others in a desired professional field. (p. 34)

## **Personal and Professional Roles and Responsibilities – Kim**

As a student in this doctoral program, I have realized that I am no longer in a position on campus in which I am serving students to the best of my ability. I have discovered that I am underutilizing my skill sets. I am beginning to see more and more that I want to work in a position on campus in which I work with first-generation and non-traditional students.

I want to create a place on campus where a sense of community can be built for these populations and their voices can be heard and respected. I want to appeal to the administration to create a position where I can become a resource, advisor, counselor, and encourager for these two populations and other underserved students. I believe all of my personal experiences and knowledge gleaned from this doctoral program make me an excellent candidate for this position. I know it will take a lot of hard work and dedication. Yet, I am confident I can handle the challenge and I will be able to give a voice to one that has not been heard on our campus nearly enough.

I would also like to find a place on campus to host various events which encourage active student participation and further strengthen a sense of community or family. I believe this type of event would be a great outlet for faculty, staff, and other students to become involved in interaction where support groups can be formed and encouragement offered. These motivators will provide support many of these students are not receiving at home. These simple steps could greatly impact our retention efforts of underserved student populations by having them feel as though they are part of the bigger university community.

## **Dissemination of the Research**

We have designed several plans to disseminate our findings. As scholar-practitioners, it is important to share relevant information with anyone who desires to see it. To make our

research available to others, we will use several methods. The first thing we will do is make our research available through the University of Mississippi Libraries. This will allow other researchers the opportunity to review our research as scholars or practitioners.

As scholars, we strive to have our research published so that it is disseminated more quickly. Our goal is to have our research published in at least one relevant journal by the end of 2019. We will target the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *Journal of First-Year Experience and Students in Transition*, and the *Journal of College Student Retention*. These journals will serve as the starting point where we will seek publication.

Another method of dissemination will be the use of professional associations. Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education hosts an annual conference on retention. This will provide us an opportunity to present our research to administrators and other scholar-practitioners. Attending professional conferences provides an opportunity to get our findings into the hands of the administrators who are the decision-makers. This could potentially lead to implementing policies based on our findings.

The use of social media is a very powerful tool. It is hard to imagine the world before social media because it is so far-reaching. We recognize the potential that social media offers. Because of the popularity and availability of social media, we plan to utilize Facebook and Twitter to disseminate our research. We plan to utilize our personal social media accounts, and attempt to partner with the School of Education at the University of Mississippi to reach a larger audience.

The University of Mississippi offers a centralized notification system for faculty and staff. As members of the university community, we have access to this system and plan to utilize it to present our research for public consumption. Scholar-practitioners all over campus will

have an opportunity to review our research findings. This could make it easier to recruit faculty and staff when implementing some of the suggested improvements.

Lastly, we will disseminate our plan to the decision-makers. The Office of the Chancellor, Office of the Provost, and the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs should all have a copy of this research. It is extremely important to have complete buy-in from all the university administrators. When trying to create and implement new policies, one must have buy-in from all the relevant stakeholders.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this research was to explore the potential efficacy of the Foundations for Academic Success Track (FASTrack) academic cohort program at the University of Mississippi and its service of such programs to meet the needs of underrepresented student populations. According to students' perceptions can learning communities provide measurable rewards regarding overall student satisfaction, increased social interaction, and other long-term benefits? Do students believe academic cohorts positively influence their grade point averages and provide positive social and academic transitions?

According to students' perspectives, the FASTrack program at the University of Mississippi does provide measurable rewards regarding overall student satisfaction. The program does increase social interaction and provide other long-term benefits. Although the students did not reveal as many academic benefits, the prevailing thought by the students indicated that the positive social transitions were a key component of the program's success.

Many of the students who were surveyed or interviewed raved about how much the program allowed them to meet and interact with new people which allowed them to step out of their comfort zone. Social transition is a very important factor to new freshmen, which can often

lead to success in college. The FASTrack program provided the ideal type of social engagement, at least from the students' perspectives. Although this program is an academic cohort, the students proclaimed it to be an excellent program for social transition. African American students seemed to acknowledge the benefits of this program at a higher rate than the Caucasian students at the University of Mississippi. This is likely because Caucasian students are in an environment where they are once again the majority population. First-generation students acknowledged benefits of the FASTrack program at a higher rate than the non-first-generation students in the program. This is likely because non-first-generation students have access to parents/guardians who can guide them through navigating the college experience.

Both African American and first-generation students are embarking on a journey in an environment that is new and often overwhelming to them. Being an underrepresented student at such a large institution can often lead to some fear and anxiety. From the students' perspectives, the FASTrack program at the University of Mississippi helped calm the anxiety and assisted in a successful transition, at least socially. The social transition allowed these students to focus on their academics more because they did not worry as much about finding a safe space in a new environment.

Feeling comfortable with the instructor helped to breakdown the imaginary wall that students see when approaching faculty members on a college campus. Hand-picked instructors selected by the FASTrack administration, assured continuity and allowed for closer monitoring of student academic and social transitions. These carefully constructed program designs helped level the playing field for underrepresented students, making the FASTrack program a viable option for freshmen first-generation and African American students at the University of Mississippi.

Our research findings support the scholarly literature and the theoretical framework for this study. Because of this, we have provided recommendations for improvement of the FASTrack academic program. Our recommendations will allow the FASTrack program to be more equitable for underrepresented student populations and ensure that the program lives up to the CPED principles of equity, ethics, and social justice. In addition, the knowledge we as researchers, derived from conducting interviews, administering surveys, coding student remarks, and reviewing scholarly literature allows us to become bigger, bolder advocates for underrepresented student populations on our campus.



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## LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: LETTER TO FASTRACK ALUMNI

Dear FASTrack Alumni,

We are writing to tell you about the FASTrack study being conducted by Kim Barnes and Sovent Taylor, doctoral students at The University of Mississippi. We received your name from the College of Liberal Arts and the FASTrack office.

The purpose of this research is to better understand your experiences in the FASTrack program. If you are interested in learning more about this study, please contact us using the information below.

It is important to know that this letter is not to tell you to join this study. It is your decision. Your participation is voluntary. Whether or not you participate in this study will have no effect on your relationship with FASTrack or The University of Mississippi.

You do not have to respond if you are not interested in this study. If you do not respond, no one will contact you, but you may receive another email which you can simply disregard.

If you would like to participate in this survey, please click here (we will insert survey link once created).

As a follow-up to the survey, we are also conducting interviews. If you are interested in interviewing with one of us, please send an email to either of the addresses below and one of us will schedule the interview.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Sovent Taylor  
[sovent@olemiss.edu](mailto:sovent@olemiss.edu)

Kim Barnes  
[krbarnes@olemiss.edu](mailto:krbarnes@olemiss.edu)

APPENDIX B: POTENTIAL SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR FASTRACK ALUMNI  
PARTICIPANTS

- List your major
- List previous majors
- Ever been a STEM major?
- Either parent graduate from college with a four-year degree
- Why did you attend Ole Miss?
- What were benefits (if any) of your participation in FASTrack?
- How beneficial do you think FASTrack is on a scale of 1 (one) to 4 (four) with 4 (four) being very beneficial and 1 (one) being not beneficial?

4	3	2	1
<b>Very Beneficial</b>	<b>Beneficial</b>	<b>Neither</b>	<b>Not Beneficial</b>

- Did you find your EDHE 105 instructors knowledgeable? Why or why not?
- Did you find your EDHE 105 staff mentor knowledgeable? Why or why not?
- Did you find your EDHE 105 student mentor knowledgeable? Why or why not?
- How comfortable did you feel in the FASTrack cohort on a scale from 1 (one) to 5 (five) with 1 (one) being extremely uncomfortable and 5 (five) being extremely comfortable?

5	4	3	2	1
<b>Extremely Comfortable</b>	<b>Comfortable</b>	<b>Neither Comfortable nor Uncomfortable</b>	<b>Uncomfortable</b>	<b>Extremely Uncomfortable</b>

- Gender Identity

Female

Male

Transgender FTM (female-to-male)

Transgender MTF (male-to-female)

Non-binary/gender fluid/genderqueer

Not sure

Prefer to self-describe (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Prefer not to say

- Ethnicity origin (or Race): Please specify your ethnicity.

White

Hispanic or Latino

Black or African American

Native American or American Indian

Asian / Pacific Islander

Other

- Classification?

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

- What high school did you attend?
- Do you think you were more successful with FASTrack? Why or why not?
- Additional Comments about your personal experience with FASTrack.



APPENDIX C: POTENTIAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR ALL FASTRACK  
PARTICIPANTS

- Are you still friends with any of your FASTrack cohort members?
- Did FASTrack help with your adjustment to college?
- Did it help taking your classes with the same people?
- Did your mentor contribute to your success? How?
- Do you feel class selections are in the right format?
- Do you find your mentors helpful?
- Do you think FASTrack catered to one group or another? Which group? Why?
- Have you changed your major? Why?
- How did you like your FASTrack student mentor?
- How do you like having a faculty/staff mentor?
- How do you like taking courses with the same group of students?
- How has FASTrack helped or not helped you during your time at Ole Miss?
- Tell us about yourself.
- What changes would you make to the FASTrack program?
- What factors contributed to your decision to participate in FASTrack?
- What is your current major or are you undecided?
- Where are you from?
- Why did you select Ole Miss?
- Would you have been successful with/without FASTrack?
- Would you recommend FASTrack to incoming freshmen? Why? Why not?

APPENDIX D: POTENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENT  
PARTICIPANTS

- Did either of your parents graduate from college with a four-year degree?
- Did FASTrack help you navigate the unknown? If not, what helped you on your path?
- Do you feel African American students in FASTrack are better geared for success than African Americans not enrolled in the FASTrack program?
- Do you feel like FASTrack adequately supports African American students? Why? Why not?
- Do you identify as a first-generation student?
- Do you think FASTrack should be a four-year program?
- If you were having any issues describe where you would go for help?
- Were FASTrack professors more supportive or not than your regular non-cohort classes? Why? Why not?
- What do you wish the university or FASTrack would have provided for you in terms of extra resources? How would this have helped?
- What made you decide to go to college?
- What resources did you use to select a college?
- Would FASTrack be more beneficial if students in your class were only African American students?
- Would you recommend FASTrack to other African American students?
- Would you recommend FASTrack to your high school friends?

APPENDIX E: POTENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT  
PARTICIPANTS

- Do you identify as a first-generation student? Why?
- Did either of your parents graduate from college with a four-year degree?
- What made you decide to go to college?
- What resources did you use to select a college?
- Did FASTrack help you navigate the unknown? If not, what helped you on your path?
- What do you wish the university or FASTrack would have provided for you in terms of extra resources? How would this have helped?
- Do you feel like FASTrack adequately supports first-generation students? Why? Why not?
- Do you feel first-generation students in FASTrack are better geared for success than first-generation students not enrolled in the FASTrack program?
- If you were having any issues describe where you would go for help?
- Were FASTrack professors more supportive or not than your regular non-cohort classes? Why? Why not?
- Would you recommend FASTrack to other first-generation students?
- Would you recommend FASTrack to your high school friends?
- Do you think FASTrack should be a four-year program?
- Would FASTrack be more beneficial if students in your class were only first-generation students?

APPENDIX F: POTENTIAL QUESTIONS FOR STEM MAJOR STUDENT  
PARTICIPANTS

- Did either of your parents graduate from college with a four-year degree?
- Did FASTrack help you navigate the unknown? If not, what helped you on your path?
- Did FASTrack offer support for your science and mathematics courses?
- Do you feel as though you would still be a STEM major if FASTrack offered more resources?
- Do you feel like FASTrack adequately supports STEM major students? Why? Why not?
- Do you feel STEM major students in FASTrack are better geared for success than students not enrolled in the FASTrack program?
- Do you identify as a first-generation student? Why?
- Do you identify as a STEM major student?
- Do you think FASTrack should be a four-year program?
- If you were having any issues describe where you would go for help?
- Was your FASTrack advisor helpful/knowledgeable about course selections for STEM major? If not, where did you go for advising?
- Were FASTrack professors more supportive or not than your regular non-cohort classes? Why? Why not?
- Were FASTrack professors more supportive or not than your regular non-cohort classes? Why? Why not?
- What do you wish the university or FASTrack would have provided for you in terms of extra resources? How would this have helped?
- What made you decide to go to college?
- What resources did you use to select a college?
- What type of resources would be beneficial? Why?
- Would FASTrack be more beneficial if students in your class were only STEM major students?
- Would you recommend FASTrack to other STEM major students? Why?
- Would you recommend FASTrack to your high school friends?



APPENDIX G: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH FORM

## **Consent to Participate in Research Form**

### **Study Title: Academic Cohorts**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Kim Barnes and Sovent Taylor, who are doctoral students in the School of Education Department at The University of Mississippi. Mrs. Barnes and Mr. Taylor are conducting this research for their doctoral dissertation. Their academic advisor is Dr. Neal Hutchens, [nhutche@olemiss.edu](mailto:nhutche@olemiss.edu), 662-915-7069. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You should read the information below and ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate.

The researchers conducting this study include:

#### **Kim Barnes:**

Email: [krbarnes@olemiss.edu](mailto:krbarnes@olemiss.edu)

Phone: 662-816-6278

#### **Sovent Taylor:**

Email: [sovent@olemiss.edu](mailto:sovent@olemiss.edu)

Phone: 662-801-2046

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:**

The purpose of this study is to learn how academic cohorts may be beneficial to certain student populations particularly those enrolled in health-related professions or STEM courses, students classified as first-generation, or African American students enrolled in academic cohorts at The University of Mississippi. Research will be based on evaluating student perspectives. The researchers are asking you to take part in the research because you have been identified as a student previously enrolled in the FASTrack program at The University of Mississippi.

### **WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:**

If you agree to be in this study, the researchers will conduct personal interviews and/or surveys. Interviews will include questions about faculty/staff mentors, your perceptions of the program, your experiences in the program, if you believe the program is beneficial, and any other information about the FASTrack program that you think would benefit the study. Each interview will take no more than 30 minutes each time you visit with the researcher(s), multiple interviews will most likely be needed. With your permission, we would also like to audio record each of the interviews.

Surveys will be conducted using Qualtrics. Survey questions will include questions related to: Parental educational levels, gender, race, high school name, college classification, major, FASTrack participation, success of FASTrack program, and any comments you believe would be beneficial to the study. Based on responses to the survey questions, further interviews may be requested based on targeted populations such as: first-generation student, African American student, STEM major student, or health related major student.

### **RISKS AND BENEFITS:**

There is the risk that you may find some of the questions about the program to be sensitive. However, your honest feedback will provide the main purpose of the research evaluation.

There are no benefits to the student but your responses could help future students planning to enroll at The University of Mississippi. We hope to learn more from students that took FASTrack in order to enhance the program or evaluate if the course is beneficial to certain student populations.

### **COMPENSATION:**

You will not earn any compensation for participating in this research.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Student's identities will not be revealed. Any responses that jeopardize the student's identity will not be used. Any report that we share will not include any information to identify you. Research records will be kept in a secured location that only the researchers will have access to. Once final dissertation is presented, all research interviews will be destroyed.

### **TAKING PART IS VOLUNTARY:**

Taking part in the research is completely voluntary and student is aware they will not receive any cash, extra credit, or other reward for participating. You may skip any question you do not want to answer. If you decide not take part or to skip some of the questions, your current or future relationship at The University of Mississippi will not be impacted. You are free to withdraw from the interview process at any time.

### **IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS:**

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions at any time, please feel free to contact either researcher at any time. If you have any questions, concerns, complaints about the research or researchers, you may contact the Institutional Research Board (IRB) Office at any time by phone: 662-915-7482 or email: [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).

### **IRB APPROVAL:**

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study fulfills the human research subject protections obligations required by state and federal law and University policies. If you have any questions

or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or [irb@olemiss.edu](mailto:irb@olemiss.edu).

Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, then decide if you want to be in the study or not.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

**STATEMENT OF CONSENT:**

I have read the above information and have received answers to all questions that I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

By initialing this line, I certify I am over 18 years of age: \_\_\_\_\_

Your Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview audio recorded.

Your Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Your Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX H: THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI RELEASE FORM

**THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI**

**RELEASE**

For valuable consideration, I do hereby authorize The University of Mississippi, its assignees, agents, employees, designees, and those acting pursuant to its authority (“UM”) to:

- a. Record my participation and appearance on video tape, audio tape, film, photograph or any other medium (“Recordings”).
- b. Use my name, likeness, voice and biographical material in connection with these recordings.
- c. Exhibit, copy, reproduce, perform, display or distribute such Recordings (and to create derivative works from them) in whole or in part without restrictions or limitation in any format or medium for any purpose which The University of Mississippi, and those acting pursuant to its authority, deem appropriate.
- d. I release UM from any and all claims and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of such Recordings including any claims for defamation, invasion of privacy, rights of publicity, or copyright.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

# VITA

**KIM BARNES**

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## **Education:**

**University of Mississippi**, University, Mississippi  
*Master of Arts Higher Education/Student Personnel*  
**August 2010**

**University of Mississippi**, University, Mississippi  
*Bachelor of Science, Family and Consumer Sciences*  
**May 2006**

## **Summary of Qualifications and Skills:**

- Proven determination, dependability, commitment, intelligence, and flexibility to work effectively with all university stakeholders.
- Understand the positive benefits of extending diverse and inclusive service to all customer populations and management.
- Able to establish work priorities and coordinate student work schedules.
- Extensive background and knowledge in student service administration.
- Cultivated relationships with Development Office and Alumni Affairs to coordinate solicitation efforts to best serve and meet the needs of the university.
- Exceptional versatility and adaptability.
- Professional teaching experience with freshmen students.
- Excellent strategic and organizational skills for improved productivity.
- Make appropriate referrals as needed.
- Collaborated with Special Events to promote successful donor events.

- Chaired and served on multiple search committees for various campus positions.
- Recognized as outstanding staff member EEO 4 category, 2015-2016.
- Assisted in daily operations to enhance departmental productivity.

**Higher Education Experience**  
**University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi**  
**Teaching Experience:**

**School of Education:**

***Instructor of EDHE 105: Freshman Year Experience***

*August 2011 to present*

Challenge, facilitate, and encourage student participation in campus activities. Engage in discussions regarding real-life situations. Prepare materials and lessons to advance the university curriculum. Develop and encourage successful study skill strategies. Design, build, and maintain a plan for students' academic success. Foster an awareness and appreciation for time management, budgeting, money management, goal setting, note taking, effective writing, healthy relationships, and critical thinking skills. Advocate for the importance of diversity, inclusion, and civility. Advise student on academic courses.

**Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning:**

***Instructor of EDHE 101: Academic Skills for College***

*January 2016 to present*

Instruct students on academic skills to be successful college students. Encourage good planning skills. Engage in discussions regarding academic challenges and situations. Prepare materials and lessons to advance student success. Develop and encourage successful study skill strategies. Design, build, and maintain a plan for students' academic success.

**Professional Experience:**

**The University of Mississippi**  
**Office of the Chancellor**

*Executive Coordinator to the Chancellor, July 2010 to present*

Provide administrative support to the Chancellor and Chief of Staff to the Chancellor. Orchestrate and maintain complex calendar of appointments for the Chancellor. Arrange extensive travel arrangements for Chancellor and Vice Chancellors. Develop and maintain excellent relationships with IHL Board members, Vice Chancellors, students,



alumni, faculty, staff, and Medical Center staff and administration. Able to quickly rearrange schedules and handle multiple tasks. Constant attention to detail. Coordinate dinner meetings and other social events. Process various reimbursement forms. Maintain continuous and open dialogue with all campus organizations and departments. Utilize decision making and effective communication skills. Exercise high degree of proficiency and discretion. Compose and edit correspondence and various reports. Monitor and maintain university standing committee membership. Implement and sustain an extensive filing system. Manage extensive contact data bases. Resolve issues for various university stakeholders. Train student employees. Streamline and organize commencement activities.

**The University of Mississippi  
Office of the Chancellor**

*Senior Administrative Secretary, May 2006 to July 2010*

Supplied administrative support to the Chancellor and to the Assistant to the Chancellor. Performed administrative and secretarial duties. Distributed all correspondence for the Chancellor. Established and maintained excellent relationships with students, parents, staff and faculty. Delivered excellent customer service. Handled complaints and resolved disputes. Able to quickly assess complex situations and identify areas for improvement. Coordinated student schedules. Trained student workers.

**The University of Mississippi  
Office of the Bursar**

*Senior Collection Assistant, August 1996 to May 2006*

Recognized by upper management for streamlining operations and enhancing overall productivity of collections. Interacted with students, staff and upper management in courteous, friendly manner. Verified all documentation and accounting record keeping, regarding payments on accounts, balances and past due accounts. Monitored all teacher/service cancellation requirements. Processed confidential student records and registration forms. Proved multi-tasking abilities by scheduling and supervising staff and student workers. Advised students on various registration issues, career selection, loan forgiveness and repayment options.

**Personal Finance Corporation  
Batesville, MS**

*Customer Service Representative, May 1994 to July 1996*