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PERCEPTIONS OF BLACK FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS REGARDING  
THE IMPACT OF RECRUITMENT PRACTICES AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE  
INSTITUTION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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

by

DEANN H. WALTER

May 2022

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## **Abstract**

In 2020, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) plagued the United States, becoming one of the greatest disruptions to the U.S. higher education system in history. Affecting every aspect of institution's operations, prospective fall 2020 and beyond students were impacted greatly by the interruption of traditional college recruitment practices which would have occurred as they made their enrollment decisions. Most affected by this interruption were students of underrepresented groups. This dissertation focuses particularly on Black first-generation students and their perceptions regarding the impact of recruitment practices at a Predominantly White Institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative study is proposed as the method of exploration in this problem of practice, building upon Critical Race Theory, Richard Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception, Hossler and Gallagher's Three-Phase College Choice Model, and W. Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory as conceptual frameworks.

## **Dedication**

To my son, Elijah, this dissertation is dedicated to you. Though you will have the privilege of not being a first-generation student, you will one day be a Black man in America. Never forget the battles fought before you for the right and access to an education. May you never stop seeking knowledge. And, may you always use it as your greatest power.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## **List of Terms & Definitions**

**Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED):** over 100 colleges and schools of education, who have committed resources to work together to undertake a critical examination of the doctorate in education through dialogue, experimentation, critical feedback, and evaluation

**Coronavirus (COVID-19):** an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, that emerged in December 2019

**Critical Race Theory (CRT):** an idea that race is a social construct, and racism pervades society

**First-Generation College Student (FGCS):** students whose parents did not complete a four-year college or university degree

**Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU):** any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission is the education of Black Americans

**Predominantly White Institution (PWI):** describes institutions of higher learning in which Whites make up at least 50% of the student enrollment

## **Manuscript One**

Higher education provides individuals with an opportunity for higher paying jobs and access to better living conditions. Data suggests that earning a college degree is associated with improved health outcomes, more civic engagement, higher pay, and upward mobility (College Board, 2020) – essentially what many consider to be the American Dream.

One of the many purposes that higher education serves within our society is the potential of social mobility. David Labaree (1997) described the social mobility purpose of higher education as an opportunity to offer individuals a chance for a better life than they might have otherwise. There are a number of ways to measure social mobility. One of the more common indicators is salary. The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (2019) report that college graduates holding a bachelor's degree earn approximately \$32,000 more per year than their counterparts who only earned a high school diploma. Additionally, unemployment rates are approximately half for individuals having earned at least a bachelor's degree compared to individuals having only earned a high school diploma (College Board, 2020).

It is important to note, however, that for many people achieving social mobility and its associated advantages is not as simple as enrolling in college or completing a degree. This is particularly true for people from groups underrepresented in higher education, including Blacks and those who would be first-generation students.

### **College Enrollment of African American Students**

Between the formative years of 1880-1920, American higher education opened doors to create more accessibility for minorities (Goldin & Katz, 1999). No longer was it an opportunity only made possible to the elite; but also, to individuals from more diverse backgrounds.

However, over time, while the nation has experienced an increase in diversity, our higher education system has not kept up with the growing pace, relative to the overall demographics. One indicator of this existing problem is the enrollment variations across racial demographics. African Americans are one demographic that has been shown to face challenges in accessing America's post-secondary institutions, for a number of reasons.

Black students deal with the ongoing misfortune of racism, which continues to persist within predominantly White colleges, making educational access and attainment problematic (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). In addition, and as equally important to consider, Grodsky (2007) asserted that due to being less academically prepared and less advantaged economically, African American students are typically less attractive to colleges and universities. The disadvantages faced by Black students who are also first-generation can only make these students appear less appealing to institutions as they discern who and where to recruit.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018) reported that, in 2017, African Americans made up 14.4 percent of the nation's 30.6 million traditional college-age population. Yet, they only accounted for 13 percent of the total undergraduate enrollment in higher education; compared to 53 percent of the total population being accounted for by their White counterparts (NCES, 2017). The gap that remains in the enrollment variations between African Americans and Whites at the undergraduate level implies that there are some discrepancies that exist with accessibility. In a society in which social mobility is one of the perceived outcomes of higher education attainment, having access is a preeminent point in a much broader discussion.

## **First-Generation Status**

Historically, African Americans have lacked the exposure, knowledge, and preparation for higher education, which makes accessing it much more problematic. Parent's unfamiliarity of the higher education system, due to not having pursued a postsecondary education is a major contributing factor. Black, first-generation students, therefore, matriculate through post-secondary education at lower levels compared to non-minority, non-first-generation students. This lack in preparation often stems from several factors, including an inherent lack of knowledge of the process and expectations within their family, which is common amongst African American, or Black, students. As a common intersecting identity, Black students are familiar with the notion of being the first in their family to pursue post-secondary education. When neither of a student's parents have earned a higher education four-year or university degree, this is referred to as being a first-generation college student (FGCS) (Center for First-Generation Student Success, n.d.). Although there are a number of variations in defining first-generation student status, including narrowing it to neither parent having attended a higher education institution, for the intent of this topic, we will use the aforementioned definition.

For students of parents with no earned bachelor's degree, plus their minoritized race, there lies a number of challenges as they pursue the next steps following high school graduation. Research by Mare shows that educational attainment by parents are the most meaningful in predicting the educational outcome of the student (as cited in Grodsky, 2007). In reports provided by Lauff and Ingels (2013), by 2012, 46 percent and 59 percent of 2002 high school sophomores whose parent held a bachelor's or master's degree, respectively, had earned a bachelor's degree (as cited in Redford & Hoyer, 2017). On the other hand, only 17 percent of students whose parent had no postsecondary education experience had earned a bachelor's

degree (Lauff & Ingels, 2013, as cited in Redford & Hoyer, 2017). However, these obstacles have not completely deterred first-generation, including Black first-generation students, from aiming for a post-secondary education. A growing number of students in higher education report being the first in their immediate family to attend college. Between 2015-2016, fifty-six percent of undergraduate students were FGCS, according to the Center for First-Generation Student Success (2019). With such a large percentage of FGCS, coupled with a growing number of Black students seeking higher education, it is imperative that more research is presented on this student population. Their appeal to higher education, and subsequent desire to obtain a degree is essential to understanding the relevance of this issue. The motivational factors for pursuing higher education, amongst many other elements, are shaped by being a student of first-generation status. A study by Edith Blackwell and Patrice J. Pinder (2014) found that first-generation students were driven to attend college by their longing to realize a better way of life. Although such motives may lead Black FGCS to higher education, there remains a disconnect in the overall number of students in this group that successfully actualize this goal in its entirety.

### **Recruitment of Black First-Generation Students**

Although there exists a substantial amount of research done on the lack of persistence of African American students once they are enrolled, there is not as much dialogue that focuses on the effectiveness of the recruitment of these students; specifically, regarding the culmination of also being first-generation. Much more, there is minimal research on how recruiting these students should look when the institution is not specifically designed to support their cultural and familial backgrounds and subsequent needs. These institutions which struggle to support Students of Color, in particular Black students, are traditionally not diversified in their student enrollment. Because of this lack in minority representation they are known most commonly as

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). PWIs, by definition and as the name implies, are historically made up of a large proportion of White students, specifically fifty percent or higher of the total enrollment (SAGE Knowledge, 2010). Additionally, and necessary to consider, it is customary that their staff and faculty generally consist of a large population of White individuals, compared to minorities, and whom often do not have the experience and knowledge of working with diverse student populations, specifically Black first-generation students (Payne & Suddler, 2014). While being first-generation has its own challenges, historically, African Americans have faced and continue to struggle with overcoming racism, stereotypes placed by Whites and other non-minority groups, microaggressions, and a significant number of other adversities (Mwangi et al., 2018; Ellis et al., 2019). There is also significant evidence that shows that Black first-generation college students are also generally of lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Hamilton (2016) states that lower SES parents typically do not have tangible resources to offer their children who are pursuing postsecondary education; are not as likely to be involved in their child's school life; and do not have the same level of capacity to transmit cultural capital of value, as compared to higher SES parents (as cited in Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). The degree to which these barriers span across the Black and first-generation student group, as well as other institution types is evident in the discussions surrounding Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU).

It is conceivable that the role and nature of HBCUs would lead many to believe that accessing these institutions for Black, first-generation students is much simpler, however, there are also important challenges that remain constant for them. One example lies in the barriers to accessing college preparatory information, which Black, first-generation students often find more problematic than their White counterparts. In a 2019 study conducted by Tobolowsky et al.,

evaluating the role of HBCUs in the college choice process for African Americans, they found that some students expressed frustration in obtaining the information they needed from the college, due to a lack of readily available reference sources. Misperceptions also related to the cost of attendance at HBCUs is another factor that plays into the obstacles faced by Black, first-generation prospective students (Tobolowsky, 2019). Additionally, the Center for First-Generation Student Success (2020) found that most HBCUs surprisingly do not offer programs and resources specifically for first-generation students. Despite the barriers that these students face, even at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), studies have shown that HBCUs still account for a large percentage of Black students enrolled in post-secondary institutions. Many of the reasons are obvious. A strong sense of community, supportive environment, diversity, access to role models and mentors, and scholarships are a few examples (Explore Colleges, 2017). The various advantages that Black students have from attending HBCUs are not surprising to most. Yet, there continues to be a larger number of Black, and other minority students, who choose to attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) instead. With this in mind, I chose to study PWIs to gain a better understanding of their institutional approaches, considering Black, first-generation prospective students.

Higher education institutions, in general, are designed for students who can afford the rising costs of tuition and fees; and have the means and resources available to meet the admissions standards of the institution. Black first-generation students are, historically and by most accounts, not such students. First-generation students are highly of African American race, approximately 41 percent; and FGCS and African Americans are traditionally of lower-socioeconomic status (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2018), making their availability of resources very limited. In addition, standardized testing, such as the ACT and SAT, for many

higher education institutions continue to remain in effect as one of the primary admissions tools, despite the growing research detailing the discrepancies in racial and socioeconomic variations favoring White, wealthier students, or as it is termed, the racial achievement gap (Singer, 2019). There is also an expectation that, once enrolled, students aim to integrate into the institution socially and academically in order to be successful and persist to degree completion (Tinto, 1993; 2004). Stephens (2012) asserts that although institutions attempt to welcome all students, regardless of their backgrounds, they are unintentionally most commonly offering a culture more supportive of students who thrive in an independently-working campus environment (as cited in Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017). These students are customarily of continuing-generation status, having familiarity with the college process. There is a historical gap in the preparation of first-generation and Black students' capacities to meet these expectations. What is often not considered is the fact that first-generation college students disproportionately hold jobs and work greater hours, compared to their continuing-generation peers, in order to pay tuition, fees, and living expenses (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016).

These financial circumstances which typically couple with limited informational, emotional, and financial resources often also coincide with varied cultural beliefs regarding the role that family plays in children's education (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). What makes these realities much more of value is the notion that postsecondary institutions are typically not likely to recruit students of lower SES backgrounds (Grodsky, 2007), even though they require the most guidance from admissions representatives. These challenges are frequently exacerbated and more apparent within PWIs. What all of this conveys is the fact that while the higher education system was not originally conceived with African Americans and other underrepresented groups, such as FGCS, in mind, even to this moment in time, it has still not yet shifted its thinking to

become more inclusive of such growing diverse populations. During a time of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when marginalized groups are hit with barriers that far exceed their typical challenges, and institutions have to make the decision to either recruit the students that have the means and abilities to enroll sans limitations, or those that very likely do not, higher education has the unique opportunity to step up.

### **COVID-19 as a Complicating Variable**

Nearing the close of 2019, the world was hit with an outbreak of a respiratory illness which began and was first identified in Wuhan, China (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). This illness, named COVID-19, which is derived from the Coronavirus disease and spreads from person to person, was reported in the United States in January of 2020 (2020). At the time of its inception into the world's population, there was no vaccine to protect against the virus, nor was there any antiviral treatment for those that had already contracted it (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). As the virus spread quickly to many countries, and killed thousands of people, the World Health Organization announced that COVID-19 was a pandemic (NPR, 2020). The last declared pandemic occurred over ten years prior, in 2009, during the H1N1 outbreak (Centers for Disease Control, 2019). Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a pandemic as, "occurring over a wide geographic area and affecting an exceptionally high proportion of the population". As with previous pandemics, and the rising concerns over the growing cases and deaths resulting from the new virus, COVID-19, the world saw a shift in its normal business and personal operations.

As cases continued to rise, the notion of limiting the spread of the virus became an important conversation. How to best do this? Social distancing, along with self-quarantine and isolation, were introduced as some of the most prominent and necessary solutions to this ongoing problem. According to health officials, this was the means that the world needed to adhere to in

order to “flatten the curve” of the COVID-19 transmission (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2020). Social distancing (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2020), which essentially meant avoiding crowds, increasing the physical space between people, and staying at least six feet away from others, was the emerging phrase that eventually led to shifting the ways in which families, organizations, and businesses, including higher education institutions, across the world began carrying out their day-to-day functions.

During times of crises, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions, like other preeminent businesses within our society, are forced to react in ways that are atypical from normal operations. Canceling meetings, visiting loved ones via electronic methods instead of in-person, working from home, and closing schools and/or moving to online instruction are some of the more prevalent measures that were immediately set in to place during COVID-19 (Johns Hopkins Medicine, 2020). What this meant for higher education was profound. With social distancing acting as a vital key in flattening the curve of disease transmission, higher education institutions’ responses included moving its courses to fully online for the duration of the spring 2020 semester, many institutions forcing their on-campus students to move out of their dormitory spaces, and encouraging their faculty and staff to work from home whenever possible. As the biggest crisis to affect higher education since the great recession, COVID-19 has the potential to dramatically and systematically disrupt the U.S. higher education system for the foreseeable future (Art & Science Group LLC, 2020). During the 2009 H1N1 epidemic, almost “every aspect of college operation—from athletics to communications to facilities and security—had to break from business as usual to meet the challenges” (The Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, 2010, p. 7). In the case of COVID-19, this disruption includes the ways in which admissions and recruitment practices are carried out, and how those

changes in practice may affect graduating high school students' plans to enroll for the upcoming fall semester. According to the Art & Science Group (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic occurring at "a point when high school seniors are on the verge of making enrollment decisions, it will be particularly important to understand the impact the novel coronavirus is having on prospective students today and the potential impact it could have on students' enrollment decisions this fall" (p. 1). Even more, institutions must use this unprecedented situation to reassess how its recruitment practices affect the college-going process of Black first-generation students, particularly those considering a Predominantly White Institution.

### **Problem of Practice**

Over the years, the number of Black students that elect to attend Predominantly White Institutions has increased (Payne & Suddler, 2014). Whether or not there are challenges or barriers in the normal process of pursuing these institutions is one factor deserving of investigation. However, in light of unusually complex situations such as a worldwide pandemic, it should not be assumed that the traditional means of accessing admissions information for Black first-generation students will remain the same. The immediate and ongoing effects of both high school closures and college campus closures are significant for FGCS and other minorities. Students that rely on high school counselors for college guidance, in addition to college admissions counselors for assistance with the admissions process are most heavily impacted by these drastic, but necessary changes. Prior research, such as that conducted by Litten (1982) has shown us that FGCS and others whose parents have less education have a higher likelihood of receiving valuable information from high school counselors. Being faced with a lessened availability of counselor contact and guidance, this could likely place a heavier weight on the practices used by institutional admissions departments. As the long-term increase in PWI interest

is not likely to subside, understanding such experiences of pursuit that coincides with being African American first-generation students is essential to properly serving them, and that includes, and fundamentally starts with, recruiting. When facing uncommon recruiting conditions, recruiters and their institution's leaders have the responsibility of considering the barriers that are faced by Black and first-generation students in the traditional pre-college phases, and how those barriers may be heightened as a result of the current circumstances.

Traditionally, admissions and recruitment offices set goals and objectives for enrollment, which guides the practices that are put in to place each recruitment cycle. Institutions, at each level and type, have customarily implemented activities and recruitment strategies to influence prospective students to go to college, regardless of where they may choose to attend, by working with schools at the secondary level (Grotsky, 2007). But how much of this is concerned with the intentional, and genuine recruitment of Black, first-generation students? And more explicitly, how much of this concern considers atypical scenarios that affect their ability to participate in traditional recruitment practices, and the resulting admissions process for these students? Predominantly White Institutions have continued to fall behind in their proclaimed objectives to recruit and enroll African American students (Evans & Noriega, 2011). Higher education institutions commonly issue diversity charges and pledges in their mission statements and strategic plans. Research practically any higher education institution, and you are bound to find a mission, vision, or principles statement that mentions the pursuit of diversity in one form or another. In fact, as Grotsky (2007) stated, even the most exclusive and high-ranking institutions want to preserve the image of equal opportunity and appear diverse. Having a diverse student population does more than make the institution look responsible. There are assertions that having a diverse student body is also advantageous for other students, including Whites, in providing an

improved educational experience and a more thought-provoking campus community (Orfield, 2001). But, aside from the fact that these institutions are aware that diversity is a focus point in the higher education system, and in society that should be recognized, the real question is what practices are realistically being set into place to make such claimed goals actionable and attainable, in any recruiting circumstance?

In order to provide a diverse campus community and classroom experience that colleges and universities so often speak of, recruiting and marketing strategies must be designed to specifically recruit for such groups of students (Evans & Noriega, 2011). During unforeseen and uncommon world shifts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when standard recruitment operations, such as college fairs, high school visits, on-campus tours, and face-to-face admissions meetings, are not possible, a much greater responsibility is placed on recruitment offices to remain effective. A major part of the discussion of the effectiveness of diverse recruitment practices involves Black, first-generation students and their generational and systematic iniquities. With limited resources and a dramatic deviation in institution's means of recruiting, such as during a pandemic, it is imperative to consider the effects this may have on higher education's process and priority of recruiting Black first-generation students. Facing the exacerbated challenges of underrepresented groups, when traditional practices are even less practical, institutions must make tough, but conscientious decisions to adjust for such barriers in their newly innovated practices.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This proposed study will explore the perceptions of Black, first-generation college students regarding the impact of recruitment practices, during the COVID-19 pandemic, at a

Predominantly White Institution. The following sections will provide further context, as I will specifically be investigating this point in question at the University of Mississippi (UM).

### *African American Students at the University of Mississippi*

In the state of Mississippi, African Americans account for 37.8 percent of the overall population (United States Census Bureau, 2020). As the second-largest group in race demographics, it could be presumed that a major state institution, such as the University of Mississippi, would have a student population which mirrors that of its state. This, however, is not the case. The University of Mississippi is a four-year flagship institution located in Oxford, Mississippi (University of Mississippi, 2020), and is the largest public research institution in the state of Mississippi (Forbes, 2020). The total undergraduate student enrollment for fall 2018-2019 at the University of Mississippi was 17,418. Of that, 2,107, or 12.1 percent were Black students (University of Mississippi, 2020). In the context of discussing recruitment, it is important to consider the disproportionality of the state of Mississippi's demographics compared to that of the University of Mississippi's. Not only is it necessary to acknowledge other factors such as access which may stem from the poverty rate of Blacks in the state, but also how access to this specific institution may be limited in part due to recruitment practices. Due to the notion that race, and as such, racism, are ingrained in society, it is therefore embedded in education which shows itself in the practices and procedures of our systems (Milner, 2017). As a result, it is necessary that continued discussions and analyses into this topic are needed (2017).

When considering the recruitment of Black first-generation college students, it is necessary to consider the types of institutions these students typically attend. First-generation students have a greater rate of attending less-selective, often, two-year institutions (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). So, in large part, it is not necessarily an expectation for this subgroup of students

to seek admission to a large four-year university, like UM. However, with a vision of being a “leading force for innovation and opportunity in Mississippi, the United States, and the world” (University of Mississippi, 2020, Our Vision section), it is vital that the University of Mississippi practitioners question the processes and practices that may impact our society’s diverse populations in their decision to attend this institution, especially in the most uncertain of times.

### ***COVID-19 and the University of Mississippi***

The state of Mississippi reported its first COVID-19, or coronavirus, case in early March 2020. In as little as two weeks, the number soared to nearly 700 cases and thirteen deaths across seventy-one counties in the state (University of Mississippi Medical Center, 2020). Before long, it was not difficult to see which ethnic demographic of the state’s population was being most impacted by the virus. Within the United States, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (2020), reported on the disproportionality of the COVID-19 outbreak’s impact, which has shown to hit African Americans at a much higher rate. According to an April 2020 report released on the Mississippi State Department of Health’s website (2020), Black or African Americans accounted for over 50 percent of the state’s coronavirus cases, and close to 70 percent of all coronavirus-related deaths. A number of factors relate to such alarming data. Underlying health conditions; decreased access to proper COVID-19 testing and treatment, due to a lack of insurance and/or knowledge barriers; and, economic circumstances are some of the most profound differences faced most commonly by Blacks and other People of Color, compared to Whites (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020). Please note that for the purpose of this study, while Blacks are represented within the group People of Color, the terms People of Color and Black, or African American, are not used interchangeably. Therefore, it is worth stating that many of the challenges faced by Blacks are also experienced by other

racial minorities, including Hispanics and Asians (2020). For this research, however, Black students are of focus, due to the disproportionality of the impacts faced by this group, as well as lingering racial challenges which are exacerbated by this pandemic. Another important determinant are the locations and living arrangement challenges faced by many People of Color. In densely populated urban areas, such as multi-family unit residential buildings, social distancing is more difficult, resulting in an increased risk and likelihood of transmission. And in the state of Mississippi, Blacks make up 37.8 percent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), further demonstrating how susceptible this subgroup is to this pandemic and its effects.

Like many other institutions, as a result of COVID-19, the University of Mississippi instituted new protocols that placed its currently enrolled students, faculty, and staff in an unparalleled state. With the exception of moving face-to-face courses to fully online, the highly encouraged practice of social distancing also impacted how student affairs offices on campus conducted regular business. This includes how UM's admissions office carried out the recruitment of prospective freshman for the fall 2020 admission term. Traditionally, attending college fairs, visiting high schools in and around the state of Mississippi, meeting with students and families in one-on-one settings, and hosting on-campus tours were examples of how admissions offices shared recruiting information with prospective students. But in a time when face-to-face meetings were no longer feasible, new practices are not only recommended, but essential for the sake of the institution's future enrollment. At UM, for instance, daily virtual information sessions were put in to place in lieu of in-person campus visits, which were stated to be canceled until further notice (University of Mississippi, 2020). This is just one example of the initial transitions employed by the admissions and recruiting department. Despite these efforts,

one must consider how such implications are affecting prospective students that have limited access during even the most normal circumstances.

The opening section of this manuscript broadly describes the importance of social mobility and its variance across populations, specifically African American first-generation college students. Additionally, the questions of access and enrollment were specifically addressed. The statement of problem was also identified. The remainder of the manuscript will address my positionality in this research; conceptual framework; and literature review.

### **Reflection on Positionality**

I recognize and understand that who I am and my relationship with higher education have shaped the ways in which I view this problem. My position in relation to this proposed study, or my positionality, is discussed in this section as it impacts my choice of topic, assumptions about the topic, framework for understanding the topic, research design, future data interpretation, and recommendations (Quin, 2016). In doing so, I will discuss my personal background, professional experiences, and future professional plans.

### **Personal Background**

Higher education, in even its normal operations, can be a source of content for African American first-generation students. The roles that institutions play in this matter is one vital factor; while, upbringing, and the impressions that are formed as a result, is another. Neither my mother nor my father earned a higher education degree. Both graduates of an Athens, Georgia high school, my parents worked typical, low to medium wage jobs to make ends-meet. Despite this fact, my brother and I grew up in a reasonably average household. We were afforded everything we needed, and a fair amount of what we wanted.

From early on, we were taught the value and importance of being well-behaved and well-educated. Throughout P-12, I can recall our parents being relatively involved, attending parent-teacher conferences, showing up for school-related events, and doing all that was necessary to ensure that my brother and I were academically enriched and prepared for the future. This included enrolling my brother in a math tutoring program outside of school during his middle-school course struggles. While they were engaged during the majority of our most important educational moments, the one that we learned to be the most self-sufficient was the college-going process. Both myself and my older brother made the decision to pursue post-secondary education institutions immediately following high school. This was not something that was forced upon us, but we did know it was something they hoped for; and that more importantly, we hoped for ourselves. Despite neither of our divorced parents holding a higher education degree, we were blessed with privileges that many other Black, first-generation students are not afforded.

Our parents lacked the knowledge of the college process, but they possessed an awareness of its inherent value. Because of their efforts to ensure we had access and understood the value of school-provided resources, we ultimately had what we needed to pursue the postsecondary education we dreamed of. First-generation college students are reported to rely heavily on high school personnel for guidance during the college process (Falcon, 2015), and I found this to be the case for us. Our guidance counselors, in addition to campus organizations such as Jobs for Georgia Graduates (JGG), were profound in our introduction to college preparations and admission requirements. Using information provided by my high school, my parents drove me to college visits, purchased standardized test prep materials, and listened to my concerns of making the right college decision. They were essentially as involved as they could be, while not having the experience or cultural capital to share.

I made the decision to attend Augusta State University (ASU), a PWI, immediately following high school. Oddly enough, I do not recall the recruitment practices employed by this institution, but I was driven by the familiarity of other classmates attending, in addition to its proximity to home, in my choice selection. While many of my Black peers chose Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), as did my brother, I made the decision to attend a PWI due to my desires to be exposed to diverse cultures, experiences, and backgrounds. I earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from ASU, and years later, attended Georgia Southern University, yet another PWI, where I earned a Master of Education in Higher Education Administration.

My positionality as it relates to this topic is two-fold: an employee at a Predominantly White Institution and an African American, first-generation postsecondary graduate. As an African American who has been afforded the possibility of breaking barriers by completing college at more than one PWI, compounded with doing so as a first-generation student, it gives me a genuine motivation for studying this subject matter. While first-generation students are made up of diverse backgrounds, including other non-Black minorities; many of whom face their own struggles and barriers, my own experiences and assumptions related to recruiting and Black students are the driving forces behind my exploration of Black FGCS, specifically. Despite my privileges in pursuing and obtaining post-secondary degrees, I do not believe that institutions are doing all that they can to recruit, enroll, and retain Black students; especially when many of these students are first-generation. I also recognize that in times of crisis, all organizations turn to unconventional processes. I can only assume that in regards to higher education and recruiting, desperate times mean shifting back to the most comfortable means of obtaining prospective

students. And that includes focusing recruiting efforts to White, higher-SES, continuing-generation students.

### **Professional Experiences**

I have worked in higher education for eight years. Most of these years have been in the realm of admissions and recruitment. All of these years have been at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). Prior to relocating to Mississippi, I worked in Undergraduate Admissions at the University of North Georgia (UNG), as an Admissions Coordinator. Currently, I am the Project Manager for Marketing and Recruitment in the School of Nursing at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. What I have witnessed as a Black woman recruiting for a PWI has been profound. In my previous roles, attempting to encourage Black high school students to apply to and enroll at a majority White-serving institution was a constant challenge. While recruiting for UNG, I can recall an instance of an African American girl recounting a rumor that our institution was “racist”. This occurred a number of years ago, but this moment was telling of the impressions that many minority students likely hold towards PWIs. An unfortunate truth is that, many institutions carry with it such a reputation. For some, it is due to past racial situations; but for others, it is because of the lack of diversity on its campuses and in its recruitment practices.

The conversation of diverse student populations, the representation of students from all backgrounds, and access and attainment for these students is not a new area of discussion amongst higher education professionals. It is one that has been of focus for quite some time, and that carries a substantial amount of weight as institutions plan and prepare for each academic year. But during times of nationwide uncertainty, and a threat to the traditional recruiting practices is faced by colleges and universities across the country, it is crucial that we investigate

the significant consequences this has on new students with preexisting, external barriers. How institutions respond to this moment in time not only defines its mission and vision for years to come, but also re-shapes how students, particularly African American students considering a PWI, choose their postsecondary institution now and moving forward.

### **Future Professional Plans**

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the implications for African American first-generation students lends a new way for practitioners and scholars to learn about the disparities facing our students. It is vital for the future of higher education to be proactive in our efforts as we strive for diversity within our colleges and universities. Predominantly White Institutions have a responsibility to offer support and a welcoming environment for all students; and with the most effective strategies in place, the future of recruiting will reflect this mission.

Following the completion of my Doctor of Education, it is my goal to assume a leadership role, particularly within the division of Student Affairs that supports my focus on improving the postsecondary recruitment and retention of Black, first-generation, and other marginalized students. Research shows that Black student enrollment at PWIs is steadily increasing in the twenty-first century (Payne & Suddler, 2014). It is, therefore, my mission to utilize the data from future studies exploring this problem, and apply the frameworks to offer insightful information for use by institutions with a genuine desire to improve diversity in its student demographics. COVID-19 has proven to be one of the most staggering moments in our nation's history, and higher education has a lot more to learn from it.

As the researcher for this study, how my experiences and roles within higher education have molded my perceptions as it relates to race is important to be explored. Further, as a student in the Doctor of Education program at the University of Mississippi, my understanding of the

experiences that have made up my personal and professional life have been expanded through my introduction to several theories. Those which frame this dissertation will be explored.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical, or conceptual, framework of a study forms the foundation of knowledge that is established in research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The conceptual framework also serves the purpose of providing a construction of the information that is developed, which is to be studied (Walden University Library). Grant and Osanloo (2014) stated, “without a theoretical framework, the structure and vision for a study is unclear, much like a house that cannot be constructed without a blueprint” (p. 13). The conceptual framework for my study, which explores the perceptions of Black first-generation students regarding the impact of recruitment practices, during the COVID-19 pandemic, at a PWI, employs Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992), Richard Gregory’s Constructivist Theory of Perception (Gregory, 1970), Hossler and Gallagher’s Three-Phase College Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), and W. Timothy Coombs’ Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007).

#### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) probes the inequalities of social justice, liberation, and economic power (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). CRT offers scholars an opportunity to investigate racial injustice without restrictions (Yosso, 2005). According to Bell (1992), the analysis of stories and experiences are pivotal in understanding how race and racism shape and dominate society. In this study of Black first-generation college students, CRT serves as a prominent element as it attends to minority students’ efforts in matriculating to a majority White institution during a world health crisis. Black students and first-generation students are each in their own rights considered minority subgroups within PWIs, and therefore are subject to intersecting injustices (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, as cited in Ward et al., 2012). As this study progresses, and

experiences of Black first-generation students are explored, it is important that it is understood how race, and its converging demographics, are perceived to play a factor in recruitment encounters; specifically, during a time of unsettlement across the world.

While Solórzano (1997, 1998) identified five tenets, I will utilize the seven tenets which have evolved over the course of further research and analysis, as identified by DeCuir and Dixson (2004) and McCoy and Rodrick (2015): (a) the permanence of racism; (b) counterstorytelling; (c) interest convergence theory; (d) intersectionality; (e) Whiteness as property; (f) critique of liberalism; and (g) commitment to social justice. DeCuir and Dixson provide the following definitions for the first three tenets. The permanence of racism concedes that racism is here, and will always be a part of the experiences of People of Color.

Counterstorytelling exposes normalized discourses that are prominently accepted in majority White contexts. The interest convergence theory, based in Marxist theory, implies that Whites are only interested in the advances of African Americans, if those advances also benefit the Whites. According to Kumasi (2011), intersectionality is the idea that individuals have converging identities, which impact their interests and traits (as cited in McCoy & Rodrick, 2015). Coined originally by Crenshaw (1989), the phenomenon of intersecting identities gives us a lens from which to question the multiplicity of inequalities certain groups face, bearing in mind the various identities they hold. In describing Whiteness as property, McCoy and Rodrick (2015) use the example of higher education being traditionally accessible to Whites by way of admissions policies. In other words, Whiteness as property is most understandable as the privilege of Whiteness, in exchange for property and capital, such as education. Liberal ideologies have prompted the sixth tenet, critique of liberalism, which challenges the notions of colorblindness, objectivity, equal opportunity, neutrality of the law, and incremental change

(McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Finally, CRT has a commitment to social justice, as it strives to eliminate injustice and racism in education and society (McCoy & Rodrick, 2015).

All seven key tenets of Critical Race Theory will be applied throughout this study. The permanence of racism serves as a support factor for the overarching intent of the study. I am investigating the perceptions of Black students, which holds the presumption that race and systemic racism are important, and permanent (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015), elements shaping their perceived treatment. As DeCuir and Dixson (2004) state, the legacy of racism makes schooling problematic for Black students attending PWIs. Counterstories “add context to the “objectivity” of positivist perspectives” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, as cited in McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). This is likely the most vital piece of this study, as I will explore the perceptions through questions and open-dialogue, directly from Black first-generation students. The institution’s view of recruiting is captured through their lenses, and may be shaped by their intentions and perceived actions. It is through counterstories, however, that I will learn of the actual experiences lived by Black first-generation students. Institutions may seek to increase their enrollment of minority student populations, but without a genuine interest in such student backgrounds and their barriers, it leads to the question of CRT’s interest convergence theory. Based on the data received during this study, I will aim to determine if institutions are, in fact, pushing diversity based mainly on their own interests. This may be confirmed by the perceptions of engagement, throughout the recruiting process, held by this study’s participants. Elements of the fourth tenet, intersectionality, is demonstrated by this study’s target population of participants. Underrepresented as not only Black students, but also as first-generation, while attending a Predominantly White Institution, these student’s experiences and oppressions intersect and

should be recognized in such a manner. Higher education, and its traditional and long-standing admissions policies and practices, have been regarded as properties of Whites (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Recruiting practices, which primarily target and benefit White, non-first-generation students, rather than Blacks, are an example of Whiteness as Property. Through discussions during this study, I will seek to bring this element to the forefront of institutional practices. As I analyze the data, I will critique the institution's ideas of liberalism respective of their recruiting practices. Lastly, this research data will bring to light the social injustices faced by Black first-generation students during the pandemic; with the hope of providing them a voice in the fight for equity and equality. Through their voices, an understanding of what factors impact the development of their perceptions will be gained. Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception, which follows, provides context of the construction of perceptions.

### **Gregory's (1970) Constructivist Theory of Perception**

Our cognitive processes are affected by the perceptual set (Learndojo, 2020). This perceptual set, which is "a state of readiness for the information we receive from the environment around us", influences our memory, decision-making, learning, and perception (Learndojo, 2020). Constructivist theories of perception take on the belief that perceptions are formed from past stimulus, hypotheses, expectations, and knowledge formerly acquired by the observer (Démuth, 2013). While there are opposing views of the constructivist theories, Richard Gregory's (1970) argument will be used to construct this study. Gregory (1970) argues that individuals use past experiences or knowledge that is stored as a means to make sense of our perceptions (McLeod, 2018). His theory relies on a top-down process for forming perceptions (McLeod, 2018). Often, students approach the admissions and recruiting process with ideas of what to expect. Information has been shared from relatives, older friends, teachers, counselors, parents, or mentors. These stories, or essentially hypotheses, are then tested during the actual

process of recruiting and upon enrollment. When given ideas or stories of expectations, Gregory (1970) believes that guesses are made about what is actually taking place, and that then forms perceptions (Learndojo, 2020). Gregory's top-down theory argues that individuals rely on hypotheses and test them during experiences. If our experiences appear to mirror what we have hypothesized, we accept it as truth (Gregory, 1970, as cited in Démuth, 2013). This, according to Gregory, is essentially how our perceptions are formalized. The perceptions constructed through their experiences, in addition to the effects of race are significant as they inform the college-selection process. In the following section, Hossler and Gallagher's College Choice model (1987) will be examined.

#### **Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Developmental Model of College Choice**

The three-phase college choice model constructed by Don Hossler and Karen S. Gallagher is a model (1987) in which students gain an increased understanding of their options after the completion of high school as it relates to exploring a postsecondary educational experience. The three phases of this model include: (a) predisposition; (b) search; and (c) choice. During each transition between the three stages, individual and organizational factors merge to develop outcomes which influence the student's college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). This college choice model was developed from the constructs of two formerly established three-phase models. The works of both Gregory A. Jackson (1982) and Larry H. Litten (1982) are relevant components of Hossler and Gallagher's framework. Jackson's (1982) models' three stages include preference, exclusion, and evaluation. The model developed by Litten, also three phases, begins with the desire to pursue higher education, followed by an investigation of institutions, and lastly, applying for admission (Litten, 1982). Both Jackson and Litten laid the three-phase groundwork which guides Hossler and Gallagher's model development. Their models, are therefore, important aspects of this element.

The first stage in Hossler and Gallagher's three-phase model (1987), predisposition, is a formative point in which students work to decide whether or not postsecondary education is of interest to them. In essence, students at this stage are determining if they would like to seek further education after graduating from high school. For the purpose of this study, the predisposition stage will be examined as I explore participant's motivations for pursuing higher education, despite the nationwide pandemic. Following predisposition, students move into the search phase. This second phase is the time period when students research and collect information about higher education institutions and create, what Jackson (1982) coins, the choice set, which is the group of institutions that will be applied to for admission. The search phase is an important part of the process, as students eliminate institutions from their pursuit options. It is of necessity that I analyze how Black, first-generation students came to select the University of Mississippi as one of their application options, without the typical face-to-face visits and recruiting events. Choice, which is the final phase, is the period when students decide which institution they will attend. The search and choice phases of the college process will have the greatest bearing on my research questions for this study. COVID-19 is unlike any other period of time for fall 2020 college-bound students. The questions that I pose will grasp their perspectives of the impact that the recruitment practices had on their decision to apply to and ultimately attend the University of Mississippi.

Each of the three phases in Hossler and Gallagher's work are distinct and their occurrence depending on the individual student. It is important to understand that not all students experience this model the same way, or at the same time, even if they are within the same age or grade range. For instance, during the predisposition phase, when students determine if they want to pursue higher education, various background characteristics, such as socioeconomic status and

race, impact college going plans and how it is pursued (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The attitudes of student's parents and peers also have an effect on the decision to pursue college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Litten (1982) found that Black students begin their college-selection, or search, process later than Whites, take longer to conduct it, and finish later. Additionally, during this phase, Blacks have a greater chance of asking for information about colleges and ranking college visits and visits from college representatives as sources of information higher, compared to Whites (Litten, 1982).

Parental education also shows a large variation amongst the college selection process. Students whose parents have not attended college often begin the process somewhat later than students whose parents had some college experience (Litten, 1982). In the choice phase, students utilize the information gathered from their search to narrow their choice set, and decide which institution(s) are strong contenders for actual attendance. There are issues with studying this phase of the model, as there is a lack of available data regarding the number of applications that students submit for admission (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), at this stage, however, the applicant's preferences, the attributes of the institution being sought out, and how the institution court's the student during recruitment are vital determinants of the choice phase. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students are faced with a threat to their ability to effectively navigate the college-selection process. Institutions, on the other hand, face their own unique challenges as they manage the present and future risks presented by the occurrence of the crisis. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory, originated by W. Timothy Coombs (2007) is introduced next.

#### **W. Timothy Coombs' (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

Coombs (2007) described crisis as a “sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization’s operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat” (p. 164). The general use of the term spans a number of meanings. The first, and most generalizable, definition listed defines crisis as “a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, especially for better or for worse, is determined” (Dictionary.com, 2020). COVID-19 and its effects are considered a crisis both within the world, and in the realm of higher education, by both aforementioned interpretations. The American postsecondary system will forever be affected by its occurrence, which will re-shape every aspect of its future operations. When a crisis, such as COVID-19 transpires, our colleges and universities, just like other organizations, must utilize effective means of crisis management. W. Timothy Coombs (2007) proposed the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as a framework for understanding how communications before, during, and after a crisis can protect reputational assets. As such, Coombs’ SCCT model (2007) can be described as a three-stage process: (a) pre-crisis stage; (b) crisis stage or crisis response; and, (c) post-crisis stage (Zamoum & Gorpe, 2018).

The pre-crisis stage is important as it relates specifically to the many ways organizations can prepare leading up to crises. This first stage can be broken into three sub-stages including signal detection, prevention, and crisis preparation. During the pre-crisis stage, crisis prevention should take place, if the crisis has been detected. The intention at this point is to prepare for crisis management, with the expectation that a plan has already been set into place and is up to date (Coombs, 2007). Higher education institutions generally have policies and designated administrative divisions, such as Emergency Management Services (University of Mississippi, 2017) in place with the purpose of making preparations for certain situations in the instance it was to occur. The second stage in the process is the crisis itself. Recognizing that the crisis is

occurring and containing it are vital at this stage. This determines and is impacted by how the organization responds to the situation and how it communicates with its stakeholders. When the organization responds during the crisis, it is imperative that they are quick, accurate, and consistent (Zamoum & Gorpe, 2018). When COVID-19 became an emergency, and was deemed to be impactful to college campuses, communications via email, websites, and other official means occurred frequently as leaders made decisions for the current and future safety of students, faculty, and staff. The final, post-crisis stage, takes place after the crisis is over. It is at this stage that the organization analyzes how they handled the crisis, and evaluates how to prepare for future potential situations (Coombs, 2007). While it is safe to state that there very well may not be an official end to the COVID-19 pandemic for some time, as the crisis itself reached a flattened curve in which the virus' transmission slowed down, institutions reevaluated both its response and how its operations would evolve as a result of its occurrence. This research and its findings will serve to offer insight into this continued conversation as it relates to recruitment of and serving minority students.

My conceptual framework provides theoretical explorations into the stated problem of practice, and introduces the relationships that exist within this research's variables (Miles & Huberman, 1994; as cited in Walden University Library, 2020). The literature review, which follows, will provide additional perspective through discussing relevant scholarship.

## **Literature Review**

The study of African American, first-generation college students is essential to the overall growth and sustainability of the higher education system. While there is ample research

surrounding the experiences of Black students once enrolled at the postsecondary level, there lacks sufficient investigation into the recruitment of these students. More so, the recruitment experiences of Black, first-generation college students are additionally deficient. Ward et al. (2012) points out, “as institutions become more ethnically and racially diverse, they are, as a result, enrolling more first-generation students” (p. 76). It is of importance that scholars gain a clearer understanding of the marginalized groups that will continue to make up larger numbers of their student enrollment.

Black first-generation students face a unique opportunity, as they strive to be the first in their immediate family to attain a higher education degree (Evans & Noriega, 2011). But this opportunity comes with ample complications. Little to no college experience or information from family make navigating the college selection and admission process strenuous. As for institutions, finding ways to effectively recruit Black, first-generation students who often lack the preparation and skills of other students, can be a rather complex path. But regardless of how complicated, institutional admissions and recruiting departments owe it to their institutions and the mission of the higher education system, to implement efforts to produce equitable recruiting practices that tackle the ongoing barriers faced by Black, first-generation students.

### **Intersectionality of African American and First-Generation Status**

Amongst the preexisting factors that adversely influence the college process is the intersectionality of race and generation status. It is important to note that although the concept of intersectionality may consider the many converging identities that one may belong to, such as race, class, gender, or disability, this particular study focuses specifically on the intersection of African American race and its convergence of first-generation college student status. The significance of studying this intersectionality is explained by Hand and Payne (2008) as they

stated, “First-generation students are an often overlooked, marginalized group...because they don’t look different from other marginalized groups, such as Hispanics or African Americans...” (p. 12, as cited in Ward et al., 2012). Administrators, including those that shape the practices engaged by admissions offices, must learn of the needs, goals, and values of Black first-generation students (Ward et al., 2012) in order to properly serve them. The inequities faced as a first-generation student in an institution that serves a large population of non-first-generation college students are profound in that sole context. Ward (2012) further stated, first-generation students differ from their non-first-generation counterparts in large part due to the various demographic subsets in which they also belong. These include disadvantaged racial, income, and gender populations (2012).

### **Social Mobility as a Motivating Factor for Higher Education Attainment**

“To raise the socioeconomic status of the race it is important to raise the number of African Americans graduating from college” (Evans & Noriega, 2011, p. 8). For African American, first-generation students, the motivations for attaining a higher education are diverse and far-reaching. But, as Blackwell and Pinder’s (2014) study found, first-generation minority students are encouraged to attend college by their pursuit of a better way of life. Blackwell and Pinder sought to explore the motivational factors of first-generation minority students for pursuing a higher education, using a qualitative approach. The findings from this study have long been considered as influential factors for African Americans. Additional scholars (Freeman, 1997; St. John, 1991; Thomas, 1980) found that while all students are influenced by the economic expectations of a postsecondary degree, African Americans are influenced, particularly, by the expectation of employment, which is anticipated following completion of a higher education (as cited in Freeman, 1999).

An important tool in reaching social mobility is in the cultural capital which represents the education and subsequent advantages a person acquires (Ward et al., 2012). Such accumulations provide the capacity to move into higher social strata. Ward et al. (2012) described cultural capital as the key construct in first-generation student's experience. It is, as such, the value students accumulate over time which supports them through the navigation of the college experience, and assists them as they pursue an elevated social status and greater social mobility (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, as cited in Ward et al., 2012).

### **Access Barriers for African American First-Generation College Students**

Although higher education is one of the most prominent avenues to opportunity (Carey, 2004), accessing higher education is not an equal process for all (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). First-generation college students, as one contributing factor, are challenged by a myriad of obstacles. Wilbur and Roscigno (2016) draw on the Educational Longitudinal Study and explore the barriers faced by first-generation students as they seek to access, enroll, and complete post-secondary education. Students whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree are more likely to be from a family of lower-socioeconomic status (SES). This fact weakens the transitional experiences of going to college. For instance, parents that are lower SES have fewer tangible resources, are not as likely to be involved in their children's schooling, and have less capacity to provide their children with cultural capital of value (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Cultural capital, according to Ward et al. (2012) is a key construct in first-generation student's experiences. Initially described by Bourdieu (1973), cultural capital is the difference in educational outcomes by people of varying socioeconomic status. Parent's support and attitude regarding higher education shapes how their students seek a higher status and social mobility through post-secondary education (Ward et al., 2012). Because parents without a bachelor's degree have little

cultural capital due to a lack of familiarity, information, experience, and cultural understanding, first-generation students therefore receive very little relative to higher education (2012).

The Educational Longitudinal Model found that first-generation students report overwhelming feelings towards the application process, burdens of financial and emotional strain to pay for college, leaving their families, and sustaining themselves, amongst other challenges (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Not only are first-generation students provided less in their preparation for college, but they are underrepresented at the four-year institutional level.

For Black first-generation college students, there are paramount considerations that are faced during their transition from high school to college, and even earlier on in their k-12 experiences, that impact how they access higher education. It is therefore important for institutions to understand the intersectionality of first-generation and African American students. Students of low-income and racial minorities are commonly the first in their families to attend college (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hertel, 1992; Jenkins et al., 2009; Jehangir, 2010, as cited in Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). In 2012, the Department of Education classified the first-generation student population as 61% Hispanic, 41% of African American, and 25% White and Asian-American.

### **Recruitment of African American First-Generation Students at PWIs**

Higher education institutions, especially those concerned with the growing rate of ethnic demographics occurring within society and postsecondary education, have a responsibility as it relates to serving Black first-generation college students. Four-year colleges and universities across the country have, for some time, struggled with this realization. Predominantly White Institutions face this challenge at a considerably higher degree. On average, students of first-generation status are thirty percent less likely than their non-first-generation peers to enroll in a

four-year institution (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). The reasons for such disproportionality range from a number of factors, including the recruiting strategies employed at the institutional level. In a qualitative study by Evans and Noriega (2011), findings showed that, during the recruiting process, first-generation African American students responded best to face-to-face admissions interactions compared to other strategies employed by marketing and recruiting. When such opportunities fall short there lies a disconnect between what the student needs and what the institution has provided.

### **Transition of African American College Students at a PWI**

Previous scholars have used Critical Race Theory (CRT) with the objective of understanding the educational barriers that non-Whites face at the institutional level (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). The intent of CRT is to not only challenge racial oppression, but to also call to attention the inequities and inequalities that have shaped the society that we live in (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). The importance of CRT in American higher education, and why it should be an intentional part of the discussion is that it brings to the forefront the challenges of Whiteness as the norm within our institutions and the institutions' practices (Calmore, 1992; Taylor, 2009, as cited in McCoy & Rodrick, 2015). Focusing attention on such challenges is especially imperative while investigating the experiences of Black students transitioning into PWIs, regardless of their other associated characteristics.

In 2014, Dorian McCoy investigated the experiences of first-generation Students of Color at, what he defined as an "extreme" Predominantly White Institution, using critical race theory (as cited in McCoy & Rodrick, 2015). McCoy employed counterstorytelling in his exploration of the intersectionality of first-generation and Students of Color, to learn of their transition from diverse communities to a Predominantly White Institution. In his findings, amongst the

participant's various accounts were narratives of experiencing a difficult admissions process (McCoy, 2014, as cited in McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). This, and other outcomes of this study further provide rationale for the recognition of race and racism that may potentially be occurring in the processes of admissions recruitment, and society as a whole, which impact student's transition to post-secondary education. During national hardship and crises, such as a pandemic, racial inequality is magnified (Maxwell, 2020). With the threat of COVID-19 amongst the world as a whole, inequities that are preexisting for People of Color leave them in an increasingly uncertain position (Maxwell, 2020).

The majority of scholarship relative to African American first-generation college students is specifically focused on retention efforts and its relative shortcomings. But before institutions can make headway in their efforts of improved retention, the work must start with recruiting. In doing so, as explained in Eakins and Eakins (2017), an implementation of diversity strategies is required, with the clear objective of ensuring accountability at the institutional level (Student Affairs Department at Minnesota State Colleges and University, 2015).

### **Impact of COVID-19 on African American First-Generation College Students**

As colleges and universities grappled with the effects of COVID-19, African American first-generation students were left with a much heavier burden to bare. Health and systemic inequities have existed for minorities for centuries. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated these inequities and disparities in these communities, and placed them at greater risk of getting and spreading COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). A number of factors contribute to such disproportionalities in COVID-19 cases by race. Racial and ethnic minority members often live in densely populated areas due to residential housing segregation. Such housing situations correlate with asthma, pollution exposure, environmental

hazards, and other health conditions which place them at higher risks for contracting COVID-19. In addition, the CDC (2020) states that work circumstances relating to essential industries and inadequate sick leave are other instances of the disparities commonly faced by African American, and other People of Color. First-generation students typically grow up in households of lower-socioeconomic status, which is also linked to lower levels of educational attainment and therefore, higher rates of joblessness, which adversely affect living conditions and health outcomes (CDC, 2020). The importance of such realities is that People of Color regularly face adversities that place them at unequal playing fields. The COVID-19 pandemic has only hit this community harder, and left an impact that will affect every aspect of their lives. Access to higher education is one of those areas.

Whereas first-generation African American students typically rely on on-campus resources such as high school guidance counselors and teachers, and university admissions meetings, visits, and college fairs in their college decision making processes, (Presume, 2020; Litten, 1982) COVID-19 causes a level of uncertainty. A survey conducted by ACT to gauge the impacts on learning and environmental stressors for underserved student populations found that over a third of students surveyed had experienced a parent losing their job, a personal job loss, or caregiving responsibilities at home as a result of COVID-19 (2020). Fifteen percent of respondents experienced at least two of the aforementioned circumstances. These, and other obstacles cause a challenge during the college admissions process. In addition, simple factors such as internet access are confounded during the COVID-19 pandemic, when minority students do not have access to apply or register for college, or pay college-related expenses (Presume, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

This is the first of three manuscripts that comprise this dissertation. In Manuscript One, I have identified a complex and relevant problem of practice related to the impact of recruitment practices experienced by Black first-generation college students attending the University of Mississippi, a PWI. I have shared my personal and professional positionality, as they inform the way in which I would use the results of this study to help lead change related to the problem. A conceptual framework has been introduced, with the intent of guiding the structure of this dissertation. Finally, the problem of practice has been examined through the lens of various scholarly literature. The forthcoming manuscripts will serve two distinct purposes. Manuscript Two will present the method of assessment, via research, designed to address the problem of practice, and the proposed methodology with research questions for conducting this study. Manuscript Three will introduce my leadership philosophy, drawing on leadership theories, CPED principles, and my selected conceptual framework. Finally, the manuscript will conclude with a reflection of my experiences and lessons learned over the course of this doctoral program.

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## **Manuscript Two**

## **Abstract**

Access and attainment of a postsecondary education for racially minoritized students, particularly those who are also first-generation, is complex and often a source of content. The COVID-19 pandemic, which was first introduced in the United States in 2020, exacerbates these already-prevalent challenges, especially as institutions across the country grapple with the changing dynamic of its operations and means of recruiting prospective students. In order to assess the University of Mississippi's recruitment, this manuscript recommends an appropriate method of analysis which may be employed to address this problem of practice. To implement the proposed assessment, a qualitative methodology is suggested, using person-to-person, in-depth interviews as the means of collecting data.

Obtaining a postsecondary degree is beneficial in some way for most students. Fry (2021), points out that, despite college tuition and fee cost increases over the years and the persistent rise in student debt, there remains unquestionable financial gain from attaining at least a bachelor's degree. Individuals who have earned a four-year degree have improved economic situations, as they earn and accumulate more wealth over time (Fry, 2021). However, the pursuit of a postsecondary education is experienced vastly different by students. The expectation of access and attainment can, at times, be more difficult for people from groups underrepresented in higher education, like Black first-generation students, who face barriers beyond just their academics. First-generation students, who are defined as students whose parents have not obtained a four-year postsecondary degree (Center for First-Generation Student Success, n.d.), face greater uncertainty surrounding the college-going process, which includes completing coursework in preparation for college, maneuvering through the admissions, college selection, and financial aid processes (Fry, 2021). This cultural capital, most often held by students whose parents have personal experience and subsequent success in the process of attending college, has been shown to result in better access to postsecondary education (Fry, 2021; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

Previous research has demonstrated the gravity of the impact that parental education has on students when it comes to postsecondary education access and attainment. Factors, such as academic preparation and course completion, support from parents, and family income do not necessarily decrease the access and persistence gaps that exists between first-generation and non-first-generation students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001; U.S. Department of

Education, 2018). Their parent's educational attainment did, however, show to be profound in the rate of college access and attainment amongst students.

### **Statement of Problem of Practice and Guiding Conceptual Framework**

This proposed study will explore the perceptions of Black, first-generation college students regarding the impact of recruitment practices, during the COVID-19 pandemic, at a Predominantly White Institution. As this problem is addressed, there are several elements which will work together to provide a structure to build upon. This conceptual framework employs Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992), Richard Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception (Gregory, 1970), Hossler and Gallagher's Three-Phase College Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), and W. Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007). Each aspect of the conceptual framework serves an integral role in the overall exploration of this problem. Readers interested in an extended discussion of the conceptual framework for this study are encouraged to review Manuscript One.

### **Methodology**

This section of the paper provides a description of the methodology proposed for the study. It specifically addresses the choice of method, participants, data collection, analysis, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. The section concludes with a presentation of the proposed research questions for the study.

#### **Choice of Method**

This dissertation explores the perceptions of Black, first-generation college students regarding the impact of recruitment practices, during the COVID-19 pandemic, at a Predominantly White Institution. I propose the use of a qualitative methodology approach, as this study will examine the perceptions of a particular subgroup of individuals. Qualitative research is

the most effective research tool for this purpose, as it has the ability to provide us with a person's beliefs, opinions, emotions, and behaviors which are all relatively circumstantial (Mack et al., 2005). Social contexts are also specific areas which can be explored through qualitative research (Mack et al., 2005). In this suggested study, the social contexts may include the recruiting practices experienced by the participants. Qualitative methods also afford researchers the ability to thoroughly describe relationships and experiences, and use open-ended, conversational questions (Mack et al., 2005).

### **Participants**

Participants of this study would be Black, first-generation college students who enrolled as first-year students at the University of Mississippi during the fall 2020 semester. Potential participants will be selected based on the demographic data made available to the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning (IREP). Using this information, a panel survey may be emailed, directly from the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning, to students in order to identify participants meeting the required characteristics, and to gauge their interest in participating in the study. Questions used in the panel survey should confirm identifiers such as race and first-generation status. Following acknowledgement of meeting both racial and generation-status standards, and providing their email address, individuals should be contacted via email to complete the consent form and select an interview date and time.

Participants should be selected from the fall 2020 freshman class, in an effort to gather the perceptions of these students based on their experiences of the admissions recruitment process and practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. This will allow contributors to have the best opportunity for memory recollection and storytelling, from their freshman recruitment

experiences, as it occurred during a significant time in our world's history, prior to enrolling at the University of Mississippi.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative research can take the form of several methods. Participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups are each very different, yet impactful method options that can be utilized when conducting a qualitative research study (Mack et al., 2005). As this proposed study explores Black first-generation student's perceptions, the use of in-depth interviews as the source of data collection is suggested. Interviews are the best possible option for this form of research, as the researcher will gather data on individual participants' perspectives, experiences, and histories as they ensued during COVID-19 (Mack et al., 2005). Mack et al. (2005) describes interviews as a technique which seeks to obtain a clear picture of the interviewee's perspective. The objective in this study is to learn about Black first-generation student's perceptions, and similarly, interviews allow the participants to act as the expert, while conversely, the researcher, interacts as the student (Mack et al., 2005). Suggested interview questions can be found in Appendix A at the conclusion of this manuscript. Appendix B describes the linkages between the elements of the conceptual framework and the interview questions.

Questions and responses are natural and will take form as the interview progresses. Interviews can be conducted in one-on-one settings, either in person or using Zoom, an online video conferencing tool. To record the data as it is being presented, the use of hand-written or typed transcripts and audio tapes will be critical. Following each interview, participants should be contacted for member-checking. This additional step in the data collection process is intended to confirm the validity of responses shared by the participant (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

## **Analysis**

It is recommended that a grounded theory approach, which reflects the inductive and comparative nature of this study, be used within the qualitative methodology. Grounded theory was introduced by Glaser and Strauss in their 1967 book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The intended purpose of grounded theory, and its usefulness in this study, is the development of a theory from a phenomenon, such as COVID-19, that has had little to no prior attention (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews are one commonly used method of data collection for grounded theory, analogous to other approaches used in qualitative studies. Utilizing in-depth interviews, and gaining participant's personal recollections of their experiences and their interpretations, in response to researcher-generated questions (Tie et al., 2019), would be of greatest value for this particular study. In addition, the use of purposive sampling further would allow the researcher to initially select participants that can answer the intended research questions (Tie et al., 2019).

This prospective study explores the perceptions of Black first-generation college students regarding the impact of recruitment practices during the COVID-19 pandemic at a PWI. In essence, this study is concerned with the ways in which a population of marginalized students interpret their recruiting experiences when the world was in the midst of a health crisis. In order to investigate the circumstances of student's recruitment experiences prior to entering the University of Mississippi, the suggested data analysis utilizes grounded theory's constant comparative method. One of the vital qualitative characteristics that specifically instructs the process of grounded theory, is the concurrent analysis and collection of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Accordingly, I would advise that the analysis of this study is conducted beginning at the onset of the interview process, and carried out throughout the duration of the data collection. In addition, use of open coding is considered. Open coding takes place early in the analysis and data

collection processes, using notes and comments formed during review of the first interview's transcript. The observations made of the data by the researcher at this point are expansive and not yet narrowed. During the review following the first conducted interview, each research question is re-read along with the participant's response. A line-by-line review allows the researcher to ensure that a full understanding of the responses is obtained; and that any choice in words or phrases used to answer each question is identified. Following this technique, axial coding is employed, which involves developing a scheme of categories from which selective coding, or the construction of a hypothesis based on the final connection made between codes and established categories, is developed (Tie et al., 2019). This core category leads to the following theoretical propositions.

### **Assumptions of the Anticipated Data**

In anticipation of the data that will result from the study, assumptions are useful in recognizing the perceptions held by the researcher prior to data collection. As such, the assumptions that are held include a belief that participant of this study may relay perspectives of their experiences that demonstrate elements of disproportionality as it relates to their access of information during the recruitment stages. The participant pool, all Black and first-generation, are cognizant of their realities as it relates to their marginalization, which consequently have the potential to weight on their perceptions of the impact of the recruitment practices. Four tenets of Critical Race Theory are highlighted as conceivable themes to be seen within the data,

Respondents may discuss feeling as though their race as African Americans played a factor in their recruitment experiences. This idea is held due to the belief that racism, and therefore race, is a permanent fixture in society, within education, and therefore in the practices, which include those used by the University's recruitment team. Under the premise of Whiteness

as property, higher education has historically been more accessible to Whites, which has the potential to impact the practices in recruitment. Students may experience this through their difficulties in accessing recruitment and admissions information – resources that are, by most accounts, more accessible to White non-first-generation students. A critique of liberalism, or the challenging of the view of an equal recruiting opportunity are also possible in the data. The intersection of the participant’s marginalized identities as Black and first-generation may result in questioning whether both identities were seen by the recruitment team in their practices. First-generation status is oftentimes overlooked as a marginalized identity because there is no obvious distinction from other marginalized identities, such as race.

The struggle between what’s equal and what’s equitable in the practices is one that is common amongst institutions and organizations. To be equitable requires a greater sense of awareness and intention. It requires an equity-minded approach (Kezar et al., 2021), which is conscious of race, focused on the institution, and prioritizes the advancement of equity with an awareness of the inequities in student outcomes. The assumption that students may recount perceptions of equal, yet not equitable, recruiting experiences lies in the belief that the institution, though not intentional, did not approach their practices during this time from an equity-minded view. Practices that were experienced as equitable are those in which were made available to this population of students, with the intention of meeting their needs based on the barriers they faced, especially those relating to the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Potential Limitations**

The potential limitations of this study are those which have been considered as potential factors that the researcher should be aware of. Due to the timing in which this study may occur, and the distance in time since the respondent’s recruiting experiences, some students may find it

difficult to recall specific details of this occurrence. In this same regard, participants may also question the value of this study post-COVID. Other factors to consider include the pandemic's fluidity over the last two years. Its severity at the time of the interviews may factor into how respondents relay their perceptions and what bearing it has on their recounts. Finally, as the researcher, the positionality which has been addressed is considered a possible limitation as the experiences, beliefs, and assumptions held each have the potential to impact the ways in which this study is completed. Each of the aforementioned limitations have been addressed in an effort to acknowledge and be reminded of the possible impacts to data collection or interpretation.

### **Considerations and Probable Implications**

The COVID-19 pandemic presented the higher education field with a unique opportunity. This moment in time gave us a new lens from which to view the vulnerabilities within our system and within our institutional practices. This study has the potential to identify several considerations that may result in restructuring our approach to engaging in marginalized prospective students. The practices that were put into place at the height of the pandemic for recruiting future students, such as virtual recruiting opportunities, have the potential to remain in effect for the foreseeable future as additional modes of reaching students. One must question what processes occurred across admissions and recruiting departments in the initial stages of implementing this and other strategies. For instance, were marginalized prospective students, such as Black and first-generation, of thought? This study and its potential findings provide a gateway to further considerations surrounding this problem, and therefore should remain a regular part of the conversation. The recruitment of Black first-generation students into Predominantly White Institutions is not anticipated to decline, and therefore, institutions have a substantial reason to want to remain effective in its practices of recruiting them. Additionally,

while the COVID-19 pandemic has, in some regards and by some individuals, been deemed a past occurrence, future disruptions to higher education are only a matter of time. By consistently engaging in strategies that reflect the diversity, and experienced barriers, of our prospect pool, we maintain an institutional culture of equity and inclusivity.

## **Resources**

Both external and internal resources are vital to initiating, conducting, and analyzing the research surrounding this problem of practice. External resources include the institutional support that involves the use of space on the University of Mississippi campus to hold multiple interviews. A neutral location on campus, such as the Student Union, would be most ideal. To secure the use of a room at this location, the researcher is responsible for contacting the Reservations Office in advance of the scheduled interview date. The University of Mississippi also provides Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval which grants permission for the study to be conducted. Such approval, which is required prior to initiating contact to prospective participants, is pursued via an application approval process. Following IRB approval, per a request to the Office of Institutional Research, Effectiveness, and Planning (IREP), contact is initiated to students who qualify for participation in the study. Additionally, conducting interviews, particularly during week days and business hours requires the support of my supervisor, which is also considered an external resource. Obtaining this support requires frequent communication and planning with supervisors and co-workers. Financial resources are of utmost importance for the analysis of this study. Transcription services, which are often costly, require the use of funds directly from the researcher. Scholarships, grants, or fellowships may also be financial resources awarded through various application processes. The use of each participant's time, which is spent signing up for and participating in the study, is essential to its

overall success. Finally, internal resources, which are gained over time through education, include the researcher's knowledge pertaining to the problem being addressed and the skillset needed for conducting and analyzing qualitative research.

### **Peer Review**

Peer review is an important component of any research project. It helps assure both ethics and quality. For this study, I propose the use of two forms of peer review. One is the Institutional Review Board. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Mississippi provides approval in order to conduct the qualitative study using currently enrolled students as participants. Should this study have been conducted presently, the second recommended peer review method to be utilized is the dissertation committee, by way of their review and feedback.

### **Research Questions**

The study addresses two research questions:

1. What were the recruitment experiences of Black, first-generation students at the University of Mississippi (UM) during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What impacts, if any, did Black first-generation students' recruitment experiences have on their decision to attend the University of Mississippi during COVID-19?

### **Conclusion**

This is Manuscript Two of three that make up this dissertation. In Manuscript Two, I have built upon the identified problem of practice as it relates to the impact of recruitment practices experienced by Black first-generation college students attending the University of Mississippi, a Predominantly White Institution, by developing a method of assessment which may be used to address this problem. Additionally, a plan for the methodology and identification of research questions have also been presented, along with suggested interpretations of the

anticipated data. Each of the elements addressed throughout this dissertation, including the conceptual framework and literature, build upon the forthcoming leadership philosophy statement, which is constructed based on leadership theories, and influences my personal approach to leading around this problem.

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## **List of Appendices**

## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your first interaction with the University of Mississippi (UM) about the possibility of you attending the institution.

Probes:

Tell me what you remember about that interaction.

2. Share with me any other interactions you had with the University about you attending the institution.

Probes:

What do you remember about (each of those)?

Were any of your interactions shaped by COVID-19? Why do or don't you think so?

3. Share with me how you felt about those interactions.

Probe:

You mentioned feeling... Tell me a little more about why that made you feel that way.

4. Of the interactions you had with UM, how, if at all, did any of these shape your decision to attend the University of Mississippi?

Probes:

*(Did)*: You mentioned... shaped your decision. Tell me more about that.

*(Did not)*: You mentioned none of the recruitment instances influenced your decision – what did shape your decision to attend?

5. What is your perspective of the way(s) in which the University of Mississippi handled itself during these interactions?

Probe:

Tell me more about that.

6. How, if at all, do you feel your race and/or first-generation status influenced the ways in which the University contacted or interacted with you?

Probe:

*(Did)*: Describe that for me.

*(Did or did not)*: How did that make you feel?

7. Thank you for the information you have shared with me. Is there anything else that you wish to add before we wrap up?

**Appendix B:  
Connecting Interview Questions and Elements of the Conceptual Framework**

<b>Interview Questions</b>	<b>Conceptual Framework</b>	<b>Connecting Elements</b>
Tell me about your first interaction with the University of Mississippi (UM) about the possibility of you attending the institution.	Three-Phase College Choice Model	Predisposition, search, and choice – examines the process in which students are made aware of their college-going options
Share with me any other interactions you had with the University about you attending the institution.	Three-Phase College Choice Model	Predisposition, search, and choice – examines the process in which students are made aware of their college-going options.
Share with me how you felt about those interactions.	Three-Phase College Choice Model  Constructivist Theory of Perception	Explores student’s attitudes about the institution based on their interactions.  Formulation of perceptions held by the students regarding their experiences.

<p>Of the interactions you had with UM, how, if at all, did any of these shape your decision to attend the University of Mississippi?</p>	<p>Three-Phase College Choice Model</p>	<p>During the search and choice stages of this model, students use the information and experiences to construct options for institutions of interest, and decide to apply</p>
<p>What is your perspective of the way(s) in which the University of Mississippi handled itself during these interactions?</p>	<p>Situational Crisis Communication Theory</p>	<p>Student's perceptions of the impacts of the institution's practices are developed from their experiences in the midst of the crisis, or pandemic.</p>
<p>How, if at all, do you feel your race and/or first-generation status influenced the ways in which the University contacted or interacted with you?</p>	<p>Critical Race Theory</p> <p>Constructivist Theory of Perception</p>	<p>An opportunity for analysis into how the institution recruited these students, considering their Black race. First-generation status is an intersecting identity to race.</p> <p>Student's held beliefs and constructed perceptions of the impacts their race and/or status as first-generation had on their interactions with the institution.</p>

## **Manuscript Three**

## **Abstract**

Despite the barriers that are faced by African American students in the pursuit of a postsecondary education, many choose Predominantly White Institutions as their college or university of choice. Intersecting identities, such as first-generation student status, are added stressors that complicate the college-going process. The COVID-19 pandemic introduces even greater challenges for students, as well as for institutions responsible for enrolling them. This manuscript builds on this exploration, by connecting positionality, conceptual theories, and leadership theories to my approach in leading the efforts to bring about change surrounding the recruitment of Black first-generation students, bearing in mind the impacts experienced by these students as a result of the pandemic. Employing the Transformative Leadership Theory, a personal leadership approach is examined. Future plans leading around the problem of practice include incorporating the notion of Critical Race Theory's story-telling into practices at the institutional level, encouraging authentic dialogue between students and Student Affairs leaders.

In March of 2020, “the COVID-19 pandemic brought learning to a screeching halt worldwide, creating the most severe global education disruption in history” (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021). As the biggest disruption our systems have experienced, every aspect of education was impacted – including the entire higher education sector. UNESCO reports that, in April 2020, more than 1,000 million, or 89.4 percent of learners, were affected by the COVID-19 disruption, globally (as cited in Marinoni, 2020). With an impact of this magnitude, the level of interruption felt across our higher education institutions within the United States was also profound. During the spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic saw a surge in infection rates, over 1,300 institutions in every U.S. state canceled traditional face-to-face classes or moved their classes to online instruction (Smalley, 2021). With so many changes occurring at the instructional level in our institutions, it is inherent that we consider what other impacts occurred across our institutions’ campuses as a result of the pandemic. One such factor is that of undergraduate student recruitment. More specifically, the recruitment of marginalized student groups – such as those of African American and first-generation status. Before addressing the impacts of COVID-19 on this student population, it is vital to first examine their relationship with higher education in more typical periods.

In 2019, the percentage of African American, or Black, students who immediately enrolled in a college or university after high school completion was 57 percent (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). In the same year, the rate for White students was 69

percent (2021). According to NCES, each year between 2011 and 2019, the immediate college enrollment rate was higher for White students than for Blacks. This data demonstrates the necessity for focusing our attention on the enrollment and recruitment of the African American student population, at the undergraduate level. Accessing higher education, especially at four-year colleges and universities, has been and continues to be difficult for Black students (St. Amour, 2020). And, in more recent years, accessing public flagship and research universities, has become increasingly challenging (2020).

A number of generational barriers can be attributed to this variation in post-secondary enrollment. African American students are reported to represent nineteen percent of first-generation college students (FGCS) (Postsecondary National Policy Institute [PNPI], 2021), which is characterized by having parents or guardians who have not earned a post-secondary degree (The Black First-gen Collective, 2020). As first-generation students, they are more likely than their non-first-generation peers to have other traits, such as minority race, that threaten their pursuit of a college education (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012), and not have the collegiate experiences and support that their counterparts have to promote college attainment (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Though these students are distinctly identified by their African American race, their first-generation student status often goes unnoticed (St. Amour, 2020), despite the many challenges that are experienced as a result of these bridging identities. One such example of the challenges experienced across both identities is the lack of preparedness for higher education. This can be attributed to inadequate knowledge, resulting from the minimal amount of exposure these students have to the postsecondary education experience (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012). Fry (2021) states that, “whether labelled “college knowledge” or “cultural capital”, students whose parents have their own experience and success in how to go to college have greater access to

postsecondary education” (para. 4). Poverty, familial background and influences, in addition to deficient k-12 school resources are all examples of the inevitable conflicts faced by Black first-generation students, creating barriers to higher education. First-generation students also face barriers stemming from family, social, cultural, and academic transitions that occur at the postsecondary level (London, 1989; as cited in Stebleton & Soria, 2012). However, research has suggested that, despite the low retention and graduation rates, the number of Black students opting for Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) as their college or university of choice continues to rise (Payne & Suddler, 2014). This implies that the number of first-generation college students enrolling at these institutions is also increasing. With a continued rise in Black first-generation students at PWIs, institutional administrators, staff, and faculty must be educated about the experiences of the intersecting identities of Black first-generation students (Wiggins, 2011).

As the educational barriers of Black first-generation students are crucial to understand, so are their motivations for being in pursuit of and obtaining a post-secondary education. In a study conducted by Blackwell and Pinder (2014) examining the motivational factors of first-generation minority college students who choose to overcome generational histories to pursue postsecondary education, findings demonstrated the prevailing theme of wanting a better life than they had been exposed to. The aspiration for an improved way of living, especially compared to the potential life in alternative circumstances, is an example of what David Labaree (1997) describes as social mobility – one of his three goals of education. Data suggests that the long-term financial benefits of earning a four-year degree are undeniable, as holding a bachelor’s degree has the potential to provide better economic outcomes for adults, compared to those who

do not complete college (Fry, 2021). Not only do they earn more, but they also accumulate more wealth over time (2021).

### **Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED)**

This dissertation in practice (DiP) is written in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a doctoral program that is affiliated with the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). As a member of CPED, we as scholars and practitioners believe, “the professional doctorate in education prepares educators for the application of appropriate and specific practices, the generation of new knowledge, and for the stewardship of the profession” (CPED, 2019, Definition of the Education Doctorate section). Within the Doctor of Education in Higher Education program at the University of Mississippi, our program is ascribed to the following three guiding principles: (a) ethics; (b) equity; and (c) social justice.

#### **Ethics**

As described by Velasquez et al. (2010), ethics is based on the well-founded standards of right and wrong which determine what we should do in terms of rights, obligations, specific virtues, societal benefits, or fairness. In their Code of Ethics and Professional Practices (CEPP), the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) provides standards of conduct and service which aim to reflect their commitment in supporting students in the college transition process (2019). According to NACAC,

Promoting ethical admission practices has been the cornerstone of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) since our founding in 1937. NACAC’s Code of Ethics and Professional Practices protects the interests of both students and institutions by upholding a college admission process free from coercion and discrimination. (p. 1)

This problem of practices addresses the perceptions of Black, first-generation college students regarding the impact of recruitment practices at a Predominantly White Institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. An important element involves the ethical conduct of the UM admissions office in their decisions to engage with some of the most vulnerable prospective students, during what can be considered one of the most difficult, yet paramount, moments in their lives. Barnard (2020) proclaims, “the virus (though more severe) is analogous to college admission, a process that should not discriminate, but inherently does so” (para. 1). With an expectation to follow the practices of NACAC in their recruitment and admissions principles, it is imperative to current and future stakeholders that UM’s ethics are well established and apparent in their chosen practices.

As a higher education institution, leadership, admissions, recruitment, and other departments serving students have the ethical responsibility to identify the shortcomings faced by many of its prospective students. With the role of educating and preparing students for a diverse society, this opportunity to provide the resources for all students, particularly when traditional means are not available, is vital and should be viewed as an ethical obligation of the entire institution. As African American and first-generation prospective students face overwhelming challenges during this crisis, it is the institution’s determination of how to react that definitively defines them.

### **Equity**

Equity seeks to provide individuals with what they need in order to be successful (Waterford, 2019); and as the fundamental objective of institutions to make higher education equitable for all, it is imperative that recruiting be recognized as a catalyst for this goal. The notion of equity and what it means within our society, and particularly in postsecondary

education, is a discussion that has spanned a number of centuries. In the study to explore the perceptions of Black, first-generation students regarding the impact of recruitment practices at a PWI during the COVID-19 pandemic, equity must be an intrinsic consideration.

During COVID-19, a distinct and intentional approach to recruiting for Black, first-generation prospects is fundamental. Faced with greater disparities than Whites, African American students carry a weight that far exceeds the traditional college selection and admissions process. Coupled with their probability of being first-generation, their challenges are heightened, making accessing postsecondary institutions strenuous; especially compared to their White counterparts (Maxwell & Garcia, 2019). Explained by Presume (2020), students of color and those who are first-generation, are left without the typical support of high school teachers and guidance counselors, who are key resources, at such a decisive time. In addition, the direct health and financial effects that COVID-19 has on families of color have been profound (Gould & Wilson, 2020). The opportunity for practitioners to make a lasting change in its support, is now. COVID-19 has become an ongoing threat to African American, first-generation students with hopes of pursuing postsecondary education. It is therefore, the duty of institutions to ensure that all recruiting practices are utilized to meet the needs of each individual students' circumstances. While providing the same efforts to all students – or equality, has been the most familiar approach for institutions, now more than ever, leaders must grapple with the obligation to prioritize equity and instead provide strategies and resources aimed at overcoming more individualized student challenges (Waterford, 2019).

### **Social Justice**

Social justice “is the equal access to wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society” (Pachamama Alliance, 2019). Black, first-generation students face a number of

impediments as they attempt to navigate the road from high school to college. Many of the social injustices that African American students face have lingered for generations and, regardless of the efforts to break the generational curses by way of postsecondary education, continue to persist. Access to useful knowledge regarding the college process and experience; emotional and financial resources; cultural capital; and academic preparations such as standardized testing, college-preparatory courses, and GPA are examples of factors that threaten the recruitment and retention of Black first-generation students in higher education (Ward et al., 2012; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). At the recruitment level, this is especially meaningful as it directly impacts students' ability to qualify for college admission based on certain requirements; in addition to the type of institution they may be recognized by during the recruiting cycle and ultimately gain access to (Tinto, 2004).

Recruiting and admissions departments must also consider the impact access has on how students gather information pertaining to the institution in order to navigate the college-selection process. Litten (1982) describes the variations in race and generation status relative to the college-selection process. Blacks and first-generation students begin their selection process later than Whites and non-first-generation students, and rely on guidance counselors and college visits for access to information (1982). Whites, however, more commonly referenced their parents as primary sources of access to college advice and preparation (1982).

In the midst of a crisis, such as that occurring with the COVID-19 pandemic, the college access barriers being faced by People of Color are amplified. Travel restrictions placed on both institutions as well as families, limits the ability of first-generation and other low-income students to access the information and guidance needed to make crucial decisions (Barnard, 2020). As a postsecondary degree is intended to enhance minorities' access to better living and

financial growth, each of which are facets of social justice, the coronavirus crisis severely threatens this opportunity.

### **Approach to Helping Lead Change**

When considering the obstacles of accessing college for Black first-generation students, the realization is that actualizing these goals is not a straightforward process. All of the barriers these students face during normal circumstances are amplified during such unprecedented times, as the COVID-19 pandemic. As an additional complicating variable, both students and higher education institutions faced a new reality with a complete shift from in-person strategies, in a necessary effort to curbe the COVID-19 transmission and infection rates. In addition to the instructional changes that were immediately felt, recruitment and admissions operations were challenged as students prepared for college, and for institutions as they navigated atypical terrains for recruiting prospects. An important determining factor of our higher education institution's success in responding to the pandemic lies within their strategies for recruiting Black first-generation students, especially at Predominantly White Institutions. The decisions made surrounding the implementation of these strategies, and which strategies are deemed most essential are often at the hands of the institution's leaders. Those within such roles, which span several departments across our institutions, are tasked on a regular basis with using their leadership skills, knowledge, and experience to guide others to meet and exceed goals for the institution (Kapur, 2021). As these goals do include the recruitment and retention of a diverse student population, the value placed on such a responsibility is immense – for the institution and all of its stakeholders. Extraordinary circumstances that impact the entire institution and require a unique course of action challenges even the greatest leaders to question what principles, values, and beliefs guide their decision-making and leadership approaches. In the following sections, I

will consider my own leadership ideologies in the context of this problem. Using the anticipated data collected from this study, my positionality, which shapes my inquiry into this topic, the conceptual framework of this dissertation, and my leadership philosophy will each inform how I move forward and work to implement change around the identified problem as discussed throughout this dissertation.

### **Reflection of Positionality as a Leader of Change**

Attending higher education institutions as a Black first-generation student, I have been reminded of the privileges that are afforded to my peers who are non-minority and non-first-generation. Experiences that led me to Augusta University, a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), as an undergraduate were reflective of a family that understood the value of a postsecondary education, yet had not encountered it themselves. With both parents offering support in the areas that they could, I utilized other avenues such as high school counselors, for information and access to the colleges and universities within my reach. Eventually, I attended two other PWIs for graduate programs, following the completion of my bachelor's degree. Without such sources of knowledge which were all external to my family and household, attaining access to higher education institutions would have seemed beyond my scope of possibilities.

In addition to my experiences as a student of PWIs, I have also been employed at such institutions throughout the entirety of my professional career. These institutions include the University of North Georgia, and currently, the University of Mississippi Medical Center. Working in the enrollment management and student affairs sectors of these institutions, I have been a catalyst for recruiting and engaging other minority and first-generation students. These opportunities have been enlightening, as the impacts that have been left upon me have served to

encourage a greater understanding of the experiences of marginalized students. In turn, this has led me to my current research focus as highlighted in this dissertation. My future aspirations in higher education, as it relates to my career, are also indicative of such encounters. Becoming a leader, working alongside other change seekers, committed to improving not only the recruitment, but also the retention of Black, and other minority, first-generation students is my ultimate goal. As a professional and future leader in the student affairs realm of higher education, I also understand that there are ample resources and stakeholders that I must engage in order to create the greatest impact surrounding this objective.

### **Leadership Philosophy Statement**

The COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for African American first-generation students provide a new way for practitioners and scholars to learn about the disparities facing our students. It is vital for the future of higher education to be proactive in our efforts as we strive for diversity within our colleges and universities. Predominantly White Institutions have a responsibility to offer support and a welcoming environment for all students that can be felt even prior to enrollment; and with the most effective strategies in place, the future of recruiting will reflect this mission. Research shows that Black student enrollment at PWIs is steadily increasing in the twenty-first century (Payne & Suddler, 2014). It is, therefore, imperative that I utilize my role as a practitioner and seeker of change to be a leader in the push for improved recruitment practices of marginalized student populations that will prove effective in any operational circumstance.

A recognition of the necessity of a regenerated recruiting initiative that places diversity at the forefront of all standard recruiting practices also extends to the acknowledgment of the inequities at the higher education institutional level, and beyond. It further addresses the

relationship that exists between the global pandemic, experiences of marginalized students, and preexisting shortcomings of admissions and recruiting practices. Issues of race and systemic racism experienced by Black, and other Students of Color (SOC) have been widely examined and reported by scholars for centuries. African American students, like other SOC occupy intersecting identities, such as being first-generation college students, that compound already difficult conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic introduced yet another obstacle that threatened students' access to higher education. Thus, my research focus stems from the urgency to explore the impact of recruitment practices during COVID-19 at a Predominantly White Institution. Such impacts experienced by Black first-generation students are not only enlightening, but integral for the progression of the future of a society, and system that is undeniably diversifying.

### ***Personal Leadership Philosophy***

Within the higher education system, and particularly at the height of one of the most significant events in education's history, leadership requires us to guide those around us to affect positive and impactful change that is morally just, to seek ways to foster equitable opportunities and access, and to remain motivated to create and offer unbiased resources and support for everyone we serve. This is even more important and necessary in institutions that encounter adversities in the pursuit of diversifying their campuses. Thus, this presents the opportunity for each of us to question our own individual leadership ideologies and standards.

**Transformative Leadership Theory.** Under the assumption that Black first-generation college students face heightened, unapparelled barriers to postsecondary education access, particularly during unprecedented circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, I aim to demonstrate the significance of an established recruitment initiative that makes diversity and equity a priority of all standard recruiting practices. Using my role as a Student Affairs

administrator, I seek to incite change in the areas of the institution that meet students at the most prominent and consequential point of their college careers. Of the study exploring Black first-generation students' perceptions regarding the impact of recruitment practices during the pandemic, at a PWI, findings should be utilized in an effort to transform the ways in which primarily White-serving institutions engage marginalized prospective students. Thus, my approach to leading the way for change is reflected in leadership theories that resonate with the aims of promoting ethics, equity, and social justice, or the CPED principles, at the institutional level, through a transformative foundation. Shields (2004) states,

transformative educators and educational leaders must address issues of power, control, and inequity; they must adopt a set of guiding criteria... to act as benchmarks for the development of socially just education; and they must engage in dialogue, examine current practice, and create pedagogical conversations and communities that critically build on, and do not devalue, students' lived experiences (p. 128).

Transformative leadership, not to be confused with transactional or transformational leadership, affirms society's socially constructed nature, and critiques practices that are inequitable (Shields, 2010). Models that relate closely with its overall objective are critical theories (i.e., race and gender), cultural and social reproduction, and leadership for social justice (2010). It realizes a need to make certain that all constituents of an organization are provided a level playing field as it relates to access and academic, social, and civic outcomes (2010). Transformative leadership understands and therefore acknowledges "that certain individuals occupy a position of greater power and that individuals with other characteristics may be associated with a higher likelihood of exclusion from decisions" (Mertens, 2007, p. 87; as cited in Shields, 2010).

Early mentions of transformative educational leadership were seen in literature by William Foster (1986) and Warren Bennis (1986). Foster asserted that leadership is critically educative, and has to look not only at the current conditions that we live in, but it should also decide on the necessary change(s) (1986, as cited in Shields, 2010). Bennis (1986) not only identified three factors of transformative power – the leader, the intention, and the organization; but he also characterized transformative leadership as “the ability of the leader to reach the souls of others in a fashion which raises human consciousness, builds meanings, and inspires human intent that is the source of power” (p. 70, as cited in Shields, 2010). The notion of transformative leadership as a theory in education has also been utilized in Mezirow’s (1991, 1996) transformative learning theory; in addition to within the classroom with regards to teaching and curriculum (Duncan & Clayburn, 1997; Miettinen, 2006, as cited in Shields, 2010). Some extensions of the transformative learning theory include gender equity focuses; a rethinking of prior knowledge; and a focus on children from low socio-economic urban households (Keddie, 2006; Davis, 2006; Sterling, et al., 2007, as cited in Shields, 2010). According to Shields (2010), each expansion of the transformative learning approach emphasizes an obligation for social improvement, enhanced equity, and a reshaping of knowledge and belief structures – all of which are key to transformative leadership in education. Leaders relating their practices to transformative leadership may demonstrate their values within their team, acting as a source of influence for their staff while identifying and addressing areas within their practices needing improvement, such as the recruitment of minority students.

The intention of this topic and the research that should follow, is to engage higher education systems and practitioners in the evolving discussions surrounding equity, ethics, and social justice in our institutions. Such subjects are not new to the educational sector, as

disparities in racial, gender, and social class have been reported on for decades (Flores et al., 2019, as cited in Kantamneni, 2020). However, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, one major focal point surrounded the obvious differences that were seen, reported, and endured across racial and socio-economic backgrounds. The argument supporting the already-prevalent and well-known inequalities and inequities amongst underrepresented groups was strengthened by the presence of the pandemic (Kantamneni, 2020). Individuals from marginalized groups felt the brunt of the virus in outcomes related to their health, finances, employment (2020), and even their education. At the higher education level, students preparing to graduate from high school and enter the colleges and universities were left to decipher the recruitment stage, admissions, and enrollment processes without the traditional and heavily-relied upon practices, all the while tackling other barriers that decreased their accessibility to postsecondary education in general. The students who felt this impact the greatest were likely those of underrepresented populations, such as Black first-generation students. In an article discussing first-generation student's challenges amidst COVID-19, a number of factors were highlighted as prevalent occurrences that have impacted their education (The Hunt Institute, 2021). Those included stressors at home stemming from deprivation of adequate basic needs and healthcare access, concerns about tuition, technology access limitations, and mental health issues (2021). Such impacts are demonstrated by the reduction in number of college applications received during the span of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to The Common App (2021), applications submitted by first-generation students through January 2021 for the 2020-2021 year had decreased by three percent, compared to 2019-2020 applicant totals. While it is apparent that these external influences may make considerable cases for this decline in college application numbers, it should not be

assumed that internal institutional factors do not also carry some responsibility, which we as leaders cannot and must not ignore.

### *Analyzing Leadership from a Conceptual Context*

Transformative leadership theory serves as an ideal approach to leading a team whose objectives include embracing diversity and equity at the student level, and understanding their unique post-secondary education experiences. Thus, in addition to transformative leadership, the selected conceptual framework can also be applied to this approach in leading efforts focused on diversity and increased education access.

Critical Race Theory (Bell, 1992), Richard Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception (Gregory, 1970), Hossler and Gallagher's Three-Phase College Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), and W. Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007) have each been selected to serve as the conceptual groundwork for the exploration of the perceptions of Black first-generation college students regarding the impact of recruitment practices at a PWI, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the research phase of this problem of practice, each concept of this conceptual framework, in alignment with the leadership approach, may be applied to the findings to identify and address areas of focus and change. All practitioners, regardless of leadership status within their existing roles, have the ability to institute aspects of these models into their everyday practices. The ways in which we view the students in which we serve, may be influenced by our awareness and understanding of these philosophies.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) aims to disrupt racism and oppression (McCoy & Rodricks, 2005), and recognizes the fact that race is not an exclusive identity, rather, it intersects with other characteristics, such as gender and economic status (McCoy & Rodricks, 2005; George, 2021),

amongst others. Higher education leaders can employ CRT scholarship in their practices by using it as a means to acknowledge the vulnerability of their own potential tendencies regarding race, ignorance of the existence of racism, and how these may affect their decision-making.

Richard Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception (1970) is a valuable point of consideration for leaders in higher education as it contends with the ideal that perceptions are formed based on previously constructed beliefs, experiences, and information. From these, we attempt to make sense of our current experiences or the perceptions formed from them (McLeod, 2018). Higher education leaders, particularly those in areas directly engaging prospective students enrolling into the institution, have the opportunity to bear in mind the potential attitudes students have towards the institution or higher education system as a whole. Views that may be deemed as negative or counterintuitive to the enrollment or matriculation processes can then be addressed by way of change of or the implementation of new practices.

As students make the decision to attend the University of Mississippi during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders across the institution continue to have the responsibility of evaluating the ways in which these decisions are influenced by actions of the University. Hossler and Gallagher's Three-Phase Developmental Model of College Choice (1987) is a source of exploration in an effort to understand the predisposition, search, and choice stages of students' decision-making, which merge as students transition through each. With this information, institutional leaders can employ the resources and assistance from various departments and constituents both internal and external to the institution that directly impact students at each stage. An example of this may involve the collaboration of admissions and high school counselors to engage high school students during the search phase, for instance, which African

American students often begin later than, take longer to complete than, and finish after their White counterparts (Litten, 1982).

One point that is likely to be addressed through this problem of practice is the way in which the University of Mississippi's recruitment and admissions collaborators managed and continue to regulate its practices related to the COVID-19 crisis. W. Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory presents an ideology which attempts to understand the organizational approach to crises with three stages: (a) pre-crisis state; (b) crisis response; and (c) post-crisis state (Zamoum & Gorpe, 2018). While each stage serves as integral points for institutions during the pandemic, the crisis response and post-crisis stage both directly involve recognizing where students may be most impacted by the institution during the pandemic; and implementing changes where they are needed in order to remain accessible and effective in the future, regardless of the current state of the institution and society. In the following section, the data of the proposed study will be discussed as means of introducing appropriate change.

### **Review of Data for Initiating Change**

This dissertation proposes a qualitative research study. While this form of research is diverse in its possible data collection methods, for the intent of this topic, in-depth, person-to-person interviews are suggested. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), interviews are necessary for qualitative research when the researcher is interested in past events. As student's histories and lived experiences are substantial for the rejuvenation of our campuses' policies and structures, interviews have the ability to keep students at the center of this charge. Interviews also allow us to gather data from a larger number of people with diverse ideas and opinions (2016). The data, therefore, that is to be expected from this study when conducted includes dialogue that describes students' experiences, opinions, and perspectives.

## **Partners and Strategies for Change**

In order to initiate transformations within our postsecondary recruiting practices that will be felt by all students, regardless of the available resources or the current climate at the institutional or broader level, time is overdue for practitioners and stakeholders to realize the deficiencies within the current standards from which we have become accustomed to. We must also recognize and understand the barriers experienced by, and the subsequent needs of, Students of Color, low-income families, and students from rural areas – who are all often first-generation (The Hunt Institute, 2021). As a result of doing so, there lies the hope that a renewed approach to how operations are implemented and prioritized is established. Working towards more current practices will expose the areas that are lacking most – especially those greatly affecting Black first-generation students, and other marginalized groups. Higher education institutions traditionally employ and rely upon shareholders at various levels, both internally and externally, to make and support some of its most significant decisions. The introduction of improved recruiting practices will require this same standard of collaboration.

Through the lens of my positionality and the transformative leadership approach, which gives the leader the responsibility of enhancing social, political, and cultural capital in learning communities to offer more equitable opportunities for students (Shields, 2010), it would be my goal to employ the opinions, expertise, and input of stakeholders in various capacities across the institution. Using this leadership approach, and in respect to this problem of practice, one aspect of my leadership would be to focus more on students as direct contributors to the transformations that I am seeking. Their insight from interview data provide a doorway into further exploration. The voices of students as direct beneficiaries and benefactors to the educational experience, from recruitment through degree completion, is essential. Engaging in storytelling, and opportunities

for recounts of lived experiences and understanding their histories provides scholars and practitioners with the most perceptive information that can guide us all to effective and attainable change.

This also demonstrates greater opportunity to employ conceptual theories into our practices. One of the many powerful tools found within the Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework is that of counter-storytelling, or stories shared by individuals of marginalized communities, in support of the efforts for educational equity (Miller et al., 2020). While many definitions of counter-storytelling, or counter-narratives exist, and regardless of how scholars have chosen to characterize its purpose, such recounts are vital to document and report the racialized impacts on People of Color's educational experiences, notably as their accounts of events often conflict with those experienced by the majority, or privileged individual(s) (Miller et al., 2020). This therefore reflects the intent and promise of CRT's counter-stories – to unmask, examine, and assess the realities that are contextualized and preserved (Miller et al., 2020); as well as supports my philosophy as a leader regarding this subject.

Using the data produced as a result of the study from this dissertation, institutional leaders would be held accountable for their actions, whether in a positive or critical nature. My role also as a leader would be to rally for the use of further dialogue stemming directly from the information provided during the qualitative study. Regardless of participation in the study, students of any race may be contacted to engage in continued discussion as a way to further analyze this problem of practice in an open dialogue setting. As such, more students would be given the opportunity to share their recruitment and admissions experiences, and offer insight about the impacts the practices had on their matriculation into the institution.

An open discussion of this nature may be conducted in the format of a symposium. Symposiums, which are designed as a means of holding discussions on a certain topic is a suggested approach as a means to build upon the data that may be received from the study. Currently enrolled University of Mississippi students may be given the opportunity to attend this event, along with student affairs leaders, to discuss their views on the ways in which practices are employed at the prospective student stage. Such leaders in attendance may include roles equivalent to the Student Affairs Vice President, Director of Admissions, Multicultural Student Affairs leaders, and others with roles that engage with minority and first-generation students. Following this dialogue, additional opportunities for student feedback should be offered, via survey or another method. Opportunities for feedback at the student level provides greater input in the undertaking of improved practices that reflect their needs and place their voices at the center of recruitment transformations. Students each have diverse needs based on past experiences, backgrounds, external resources, and inherent characteristics, which must be heard. With the addition of students from varying backgrounds and races, this event provides more diversified dialogue, as well as opportunities for stakeholders to actively engage with the realities of the diverse experiences of students. Further, this provides myself, and other practitioners with an opportunity for open communication which welcomes recommendations for change. Shields (2010) states, a leader of transformative leadership “lives with tension and challenge; requires moral courage, [and] activism” (Figure 1). Accordingly, I strive to actively engage our key constituents, by recognizing what is perceived as necessary for their own success, and in turn, working to make appropriate tools and resources available to all students.

Stakeholders, many of whom hold the voice and authority to enact policies, practices, and actionable plans include leaders that work within and around the Enrollment Management and

Student Affairs sectors of the institution. Further, an acknowledgment of their power and privilege is a significant factor in pushing for change (Shields, 2010). In other words, according to Shields (2010), leaders and support staff must recognize their own authority in the practices, reactions, and actions they choose. In addition, and as important, is the concept of power as it relates to leadership's process of having influence over individuals' attitudes and behaviors (Northouse, 2019). This influence has the ability to yield vital change. As described by Shields (2010), the goal of transformative leadership is transformation at the individual, organizational, and societal levels. This, too, is reflective of my approach in leading the change surrounding improved recruiting of Black first-generation students. Reshaping and instituting new policies and practices that will become effective requires shifts at every level. Using similar techniques to those found in a 2010 study by Shields, examining two k-12 principal's practices' relation to transformative leadership, my objective is to further advocate for more flexible approaches to recruiting that centralizes equity. Such approaches may include holistic admissions processes and atypical recruiting practices for a broader reach of students, such as standardized virtual opportunities for events, campus tours and meetings which may be accessible at all times and in any operational condition.

As the divisions and departments that depend most heavily on the recruitment, admission, and enrollment of students, practitioners within these institutional areas face both high risks and potential rewards regarding the proposed changes surrounding the recruitment of Black first-generation students. Risks involve the continued decrease in applications to colleges and universities; while the rewards include improved enrollment numbers and an increase in the success outcomes of all students. At Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), these risks and rewards are essential when they threaten the ultimate progress of the equity and inclusion goals

placed at the center of many of their institution's missions and strategic plans. Further, and as described by research from Kezar et al. of the American Council on Education (2021), COVID-19 and the racialized occurrences which took place during the summer of 2020 prompted the addition of more pronounced diversity initiatives. Historically, and by definition, PWIs carry histories, ideologies, and practices that are embedded in Whiteness (Bourke, 2016). It is, therefore, the joint responsibility of the practitioners across campus, in various departments and at all levels at these institutions to break barriers and incite meaningful change through their practices, both amidst this pandemic, and hereafter, that will better contribute to the advancement of marginalized students. Through this shared equity leadership approach (SEL) (Kezar et al., 2021), which may include the admissions, recruiting, financial aid, and similar leaders in other related departments, staff and faculty are essential to these efforts due to their abilities to promote and appoint relevant new standards.

### **Concluding Self-reflection as a Scholar-Practitioner**

As a scholar-practitioner, the lessons and knowledge that I have learned have spanned from my divulgence in literature, coursework, discussions with colleagues, daily professional practices, and current events. The literature that has been read over the course of this program have provided a stable ground from which all other forms of information have been contextualized. The works that have been published by scholars committed to the advancement of education include research into subjects that serve to enhance my own understanding of the higher education system, both leading up to, and in its present state. One of the greatest lessons that has been learned is the immense amount of work our education system has to do. The work that remains to be done is substantial, yet possible with the efforts of key stakeholders – which include all who serve our students. As a scholar-practitioner this means that my work expands

beyond the day-to-day functions that make up my professional role(s). Regardless of the current position that I hold, there remains ample potential to push for change. Research, dialogue with peers, observation, and simply listening to those most impacted are all meaningful ways in which change may be furthered.

The work that I have engaged in via this program has also challenged my thinking and perspective of our postsecondary system, its purpose, meaning, and how it has come to shape, and be shaped by, our society. My introduction to David Labaree's purposes of education has been one of the most enlightening points of questioning, for the intention of gaining a greater understanding of higher education. From this exploration, the chosen problem of practice came to exist. As a scholar, I have been exposed to the significance of inquiry, as Labaree's theory challenged us to do – by questioning the intention and goals of education within our society (Labaree, 1997). This has also been profound as a practitioner and agent of change.

Other areas of growth have also expanded to my professional role. Over the course of this program, equity has been a central point of reflection – not only as one of the three Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) driving principles, and through my research interests, but also for myself as a practitioner. Becoming more equity-minded, and embracing the arduous, but worthwhile work and responsibilities of an equity-minded leader has become a goal of mine as I have progressed over the years. Through gaining greater insight about the COVID-19 impacts on underserved populations as I live through and research its effects, in addition to the ongoing barriers students within these same subgroups face as they matriculate every stage of their education, it has become increasingly apparent that our society and institutions fall short of placing equity at the top of their list of priorities. However, as a future leader within our higher education sector, I have the capabilities, through this and ongoing research and inquiry, to call

attention to the inequities and burdens our students face. By way of doing so, I strive to work alongside other change seekers to improve the approaches to engaging and supporting diverse student populations.

The work that I must do in order to effect the changes that I know are needed will require a substantial amount of effort and growth in my skillset and competencies. As an equity-minded leader in higher education, I must embrace questioning my own assumptions, identifying where biases exist, being accountable for student's success, and understanding that closing the existing gaps which threaten student success is the ongoing responsibility of both myself and the institution (American Council on Education, 2021).

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## VITA

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### KEY AREAS OF EXPERIENCE

Exemplary communication skills in diverse settings

Efficient Customer Service Experience

Marketing

Social Media Proficiency

Event Planning & Coordination

Presentation Skills

Microsoft Office Suite – Word, Excel

Detail-oriented

Supervisor Experience

Workday Recruitment Experience

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### EDUCATION

GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY, *Statesboro, GA*

*2016 - 2017*

**Master of Education in Higher Education Administration**

AUGUSTA STATE UNIVERSITY, *Augusta, GA*

*2009 - 2012*

**Bachelor of Arts in Psychology; General Studies Minor**

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### PUBLICATIONS

UMMC Office of Diversity and Inclusion's *Guide to Best Practices in Recruiting, Engaging, and Retaining a Diverse Student Population*, August 2019, University of Mississippi Medical Center

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### PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI MEDICAL CENTER, *Jackson, MS*

**Project Manager, Marketing and Recruitment, School of Nursing** *August 2021-March 2022*

- Budget planning and allocation for marketing and recruiting projects
- Collaborate in the recruitment activities of prospective nursing students, including planning travel and attendance for events, aimed to meet enrollment goals for programs at all levels
- Administrator and content creator for School of Nursing on various social media platforms

- Coordinate orientations for nursing programs
- Liaison for internal marketing to produce promotional print and electronic materials for School of Nursing
- Liaison for external vendors to select and purchase promotional recruitment materials
- Collect and submits data for U.S. News & World Report rankings
- Oversee and lead marketing projects, with consideration for current trends, program needs, and goals
- Review and reconcile billing for events and marketing purchases

**Student Services Coordinator, School of Health Related Professions (SHRP)**

*July 2018-August 2021*

- Lead coordinator, programmer, facilitator of all admissions events; including, Open Houses: Program Focus Day and Program Awareness Day each semester; managing all areas of event planning
- Lead in coordinating, planning, and facilitating career fair event, Employment Opportunities Day
- Social Media administrator and content creator for SHRP – Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter
- Implemented virtual recruiting programs, including 1:1 Drop-Ins and Friday Webinar Series for prospects during COVID-19 pandemic
- Frequent use of learning management systems, Canvas and Blackboard
- Assisted Director with planning of all other student-related activities and events held within SHRP
- Chaired SHRP’s Pre-Professional Development Committee
- Established and maintained relationships with university affiliates and stakeholders (internal and external)
- Worked regularly with Program Directors and Department Chairs across five departments and 16 programs to establish and implement specialized recruiting practices and initiatives
- Advised Student Government Association for the School of Health Related Professions (SHRP)
- Content creator and publisher for SHRP Edge Newsletter each semester
- Attended community college and university recruitment events to promote programs
- Contact person for prospective students – sending communications for applications, events, and SHRP updates
- Oversaw, reviewed, and approved all student fundraising requests; adhering to UMMC policies; Oversaw collection of funds from all fundraisers
- Regularly presented admissions criteria and program information to prospective students at recruitment events – both virtual and in-person
- Liaison/Coach for Mississippi’s Complete to Compete (C2C) initiative
- Liaison for UMMC marketing for all recruitment and marketing materials; including program brochures, fliers, and banners
- Assisted Director of Admissions with orientation programming and day-of operations
- Created, scheduled, and maintained all Workday recruiting communications, engagements, and events

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH GEORGIA- *Gainesville, GA*  
*May 2016-April 2018*

**Admissions Coordinator, Undergraduate Admissions**

- Lead coordinator, programmer, facilitator of all admissions events; including, Open House, High School Counselor Conference, and Nighthawks Luncheon for high ability students
- Established and maintained relationships with university affiliates
- Supervised three full-time employees of Admissions Processing team; supervised an Admissions Officer
- Hired, trained, evaluated, and supervised up to fifteen Student Ambassadors each term
- Served as Chair for Admissions Officer interview committee
- Coordinated and oversaw all campus tours and registration; including group, special, and daily visits
- Dual Enrollment liaison and file evaluator for all Jackson County high schools
- Daily engagement with prospective and current students, and families for recruitment and enrollment
- Evaluated admissions files and determined admissions decision for prospective students for all programs
- Audited admissions records in Elucian Banner to identify and eliminate discrepancies
- Attendee of Ruffalo Noel Levitz National Conference on Student Recruitment, Marketing, & Retention
- Maintained relationships and communications with high school counselors and administrators regularly
- Admissions liaison for Georgia's Go Back Move Ahead initiative
- Regularly presented admissions criteria to prospective students and families during campus and large group tours

**Admissions Officer/Recruiter, Undergraduate Admissions**

*July*

*2015-May 2016*

- Managed recruitment territories, and recruited in 14 counties across Metro-Atlanta, meeting enrollment goals
- Corresponded with students and parents daily regarding admissions requirements and process
- Daily use of Elucian Banner INB and Banner Web
- Determined admissions decision for prospective students by evaluating applications and supporting documents
- Presented frequently to prospective students and parents at college fairs, UNG open houses, school events, and campus tours; Dual Enrollment and undergraduate admissions
- Planned, coordinated, and executed on-site admissions days for prospective students
- Attended GACRAO 2015 conference and workshops at the University of Georgia
- Coordinated high school visits with counselors, faculty, and staff
- Maintained relationships with high school counselors, administration, prospective students, and families
- Frequently ran and interpreted reports for admissions and recruitment purposes, using BannerWeb

**Card Services, University Bookstore, Staff Associate**

- Professionally communicated verbally, and through written correspondence to students, faculty, and staff
- Coordinated Parking Committee meetings and Traffic Appeals Committee Meetings monthly
- Operated Banner Web and Banner INB frequently
- Managed POS System for Card Office transactions/ payments
- Primarily independent in managing and operating Card Services on UNG Oconee campus
- Selected, trained, and supervised up to four student employees each semester
- Proficient use in Blackboard Transaction System
- P-Card Cardholder (organized and maintained documentation and reports for monthly statements; made department purchases for Card Services and Campus Connection Bookstore for Oconee Campus; adhered to transaction and monthly budgets and policy)
- Efficient in New Student Orientation presentations to prospective students and parents
- Granted UNG key-card Door Access to F/S (Onity System) and provided weekly door reports