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## Homecoming: Examining built relationships that influence historically black college and university student experiences

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Homecoming: Examining Built Relationships that Influence Historically Black College and

University Student Experiences

by

Alvenia E. Derban

A dissertation submitted to the Department of Leadership,

School Counseling & Sport Management

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH FLORIDA

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES

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## DISSERTATION CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This dissertation by Alvenia E. Derban, entitled *Homecoming: Examining Built Relationships that Influence HBCU Student Experiences*, is approved.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my Ghanaian parents. I have reaped their sown sojourn to America where my father's dream of being an architect and my mother's dream of being a dietitian were deferred so that their children could dream and achieve in America as first-generation/first time in college graduates.

I dedicate this work to all first-generation/first-time college students who not only dare to dream but reach back and bring others with them.

I dedicate this to every faculty member, staff member, administrator, and any campus professional who took the time to listen, encourage, and inspire when a student was lost.

I dedicate this to all my students everywhere. Thank you for helping me to be better at my craft and my humanity.

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## **Abstract**

Maintaining and increasing student retention is a challenge for small institutions especially small private Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). There are factors which contribute to this problem of practice and solutions that could increase student retention given more research and analysis. The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore and examine the campus professional-student relationships to better understand the first-generation/first-time college student's experience and how these relationships may influence their retention. This study examined the experiences of three Edward Waters University students to understand a problem of practice experienced at Edward Waters University and many others, student retention. The primary research questions for this study included: (1) How do first-generation/first-time college HBCU students enrolled between 2018 and 2022 describe their campus professional-student relationships? (2) How have the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention? The data collected included two semi-structured interviews with each participant conducted over a three-month period. Findings are presented in the form of narratives, themes, and assertions. The themes emerged by looking across the participants' narratives and were developed into assertions after a thorough analysis and triangulation of the data. Assertion One identified that a meaningful campus professional-student relationship that supports retention includes behaviors that foster change, accountability, and connection. Assertion Two captured the role of leadership, call to service, and institutional pride as vehicles for supporting student retention. Finally, Assertion Three provided insight into how working through trouble with a trusted mentor served as a vehicle for change that supported retention. In combination, these three assertions illustrate key behaviors or activities of these

relationships and how mentor-like relationships intentionally entered into by campus professionals and students had a strong influence on students' retention choices. The study concludes with a discussion of the limitations of findings, implications and recommendations for practice, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“It’s kind of hard to give what you haven’t gotten before,”*

-Dr. Stephanie Campbell.

This sentiment was shared in an interview with the Dean of Operations and Student Success at Edward Waters University. She was sharing an account of a parent who asked her daughter to “come home” essentially to drop out of college to help with a family situation. The daughter was a first-generation, first-time college student. After a discussion with the parent, it was resolved that the student would remain in college because the parent wanted a better life for her daughter. She would find a different way to resolve the family situation. Dr. Campbell went above and beyond to help the student. The student trusted Dr. Campbell enough to share her concerns before dropping out. They had a positively built relationship that directly impacted her retention at the institution.

Many reasons exist related to why students attend college, stay in college, and graduate from college. These reasons include the cost of attendance, location, future career aspirations, desired major, prestige, family expectations, athletics, and legacy (Bauman et al., 2019). Given the impact economically, educationally, socially, and politically of retention on individual and societal growth (Bauman, et al., 2019), student retention is an important aspect of the student experience.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have demographics that reflect diverse ethnic minorities as the predominant racial/ethnic student enrollment on the college campus. This is indicative of the HBCUs initial purpose to serve minorities because they were the only institutions of higher education available to African Americans before the 1900s

(Bracey, 2017; Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). The student experience at HBCUs is rooted in culturally based aesthetics such as large marching bands, Black Greek letter organizations (BGLOs), a family-orientated environment, and homecoming activities that strengthen the bond between current students and alumni (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Jackson & Amparo, 2014). Some of these student activities are initiatives that are supported by the Division of Student Affairs as part of their retention goals (Ludeman & Strange, 2009).

Some of the HBCU familial initiatives such as pep rallies, homecoming activities, and honors day celebrations promote school spirit and add an opportunity for in-person connectedness (Kuh et al., 2007) between students and college professionals. When students attend college away from home they carry their bags along with their excitement as well as fear. When they arrive, they add another item to their baggage, an unspoken aspiration that says, *'I hope to make it in my new home.'* They hope that as they aspire to their goals as well as run into trouble that a relationship that they have made along the way will help to lead them to a place of safety. We metaphorically borrow the term homecoming as a way of highlighting the importance of the relationships shaped. For example, events during homecoming provide the situational environment for alumni to connect with students to share their experiences, campus professionals to relax their roles in a bounded time to engage with students on a social level, and for both students to connect with alumni and campus professionals in exploring and expanding their close relationships, creating familial ties. A more detailed explanation of the concepts of home and homecoming is further explained in the literature review. The familial quality, like those suggested in our metaphor of homecoming, are the HBCU faculty-student relationships

exemplified through the conceptual framework of fictive kin (Bernard, Issari, Moriah, Njiwaji, Obgan, & Tolliver, 2012) and othermothering (Nelson, 2013).

Although the focus of this study was on the general student experience, it should be noted that the participants enrolled at Edward Waters University between 2018 and 2022 may share in their responses the impacts of COVID-19 on their experiences. Given the timing of the study, relationships either supported or inhibited the student experience with the understanding that physical interpersonal interactions were nearly impossible. Some important student programming at HBCUs was canceled including university-wide Homecoming activities where current students, alumni, faculty, and the surrounding community traditionally gathered in-person to attend football games, tailgate, parties, and more were transitioned from in-person to a virtual platform via YouTube, Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and countless other video services (Roberson, 2020). Those students classified as first-generation/first-time in college (Engle, Bermeo, & Obrien, 2006) students who had yet to attend their college choice began their first day of class at home using technological services such as Zoom.com. This experience likely influenced how these college students would describe their making and maintaining familial relationships with campus professionals during their college experience.

To better understand the college experience from the student perspective, this instrumental case study examined the experiences of three EWU students through the fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) framework to understand how first-generation/first-time college HBCU students enrolled between 2018 and 2020 describe their

college experience, their relationships with campus professional-student, and how this experience influenced their retention.

### **Problem Statement**

Extensive research has been conducted that recognizes the importance of retention on individual and societal growth with specific attention to economic, educational, social, and political impacts (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005; Tinto, 2017; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). However, the student experiences that influence retention at HBCUs from the student's perspective are not as widely documented. The HBCU student experience is deeply rooted in and impacted by culturally based aesthetics such as marching bands, Greek letter organizations, a family-orientated environment, and homecoming activities (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014). In combination, these strengthen the bond between current students, campus professionals, and alumni (Hypolite, 2020)—through large, close, gatherings. These activities are initiatives supported by the Student Affairs division as part of their retention plans ([www.cas.org](http://www.cas.org)). The Student Affairs division is tasked with managing the collegiate experience by providing academic and social opportunities for students to be engaged, persist, and graduate (Hypolite, 2020; Hirt, et al., 2006).

Although retention is of increasing interest to the higher education community, historically, student experience narratives are not as widely included as the focus of student retention studies. However, according to Tinto (2005), the trend data over the years reflects an increasing interest in more deeply understanding student retention by expanding retention studies to include student narratives that dig more deeply into the student experience. Therefore, this research sought to fill a gap in the literature by describing the first-generation, first-time in

college HBCU student experience using the fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) framework to better understand influences on retention. This study captured the student experience with campus professionals during 2018-2022. The primary research question guiding this study was: (1) How do first-generation/first-time college HBCU students enrolled between 2018 and 2022 describe their campus professional-student relationships? (2) How have the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention?

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore and examine the campus professional-student relationships to better understand the first-generation/first-time college student's experience and how these relationships may influence their retention.

### **Research Questions**

(1) How do first-generation/first-time college HBCU students enrolled between 2018 and 2022 describe their campus professional-student relationships? (2) How have the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention?

### **Overview of Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study focused the researcher on the role of relationship and how relationship may have influenced retention and persistence. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) shared that a framework includes [drawing] “upon the concepts, definitions, models, and theories of a particular literature base and disciplinary orientation” (p. 86). This qualitative study's conceptual framework drew on the literature representing fictive kin (Ibsen & Klobus, 1972) and othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005). Othermothering is defined as relationships forged between a faculty member (as the parental figure) and their students (Griffin, 2013).



Fictive kin is defined as relationships, usually initiated by the students with a faculty member based on a familial-like relationship (Nelson, 2013). In combination, these lenses allowed the researcher to explore the role of relationships in the student experience and ultimately possible influences on student retention. Chapter two of this study describes the HBCUs' setting, events, students, faculty, and student affairs professionals as well as the elements of fictive kin and othermothering. The chapter ends by suggesting the utility of examining each of these areas using the relational lenses of fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) to better understand student retention.

### **Overview of Methodology**

The qualitative study explores the research questions: (1) How do first-generation/first-time college HBCU students enrolled between 2018 and 2022 describe their campus professional-student relationships? (2) How have the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention? The study utilized instrumental case study methodology (Stake, 1995) and interviews as detailed by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Creswell (2009). The qualitative process outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Creswell (2009) provided direction for conducting this instrumental case study (Yazan, 2015) and the series of two linked interviews with each participant provided the researcher with the opportunity to deeply explore the student experience from the student perspective. The researcher identified three first-generation and first-time college (FTIC) students with differing experiences and routes

to Edward Waters University as the participants for this study. Chapter Three details the research methodology for the study,

### **Significance of the Research**

Consistent with the philosophy of the Carnegie Program for the Education Doctorate, the purpose of this dissertation was to focus on a problem of practice, FTIC student retention, in order to understand the elements that influence retention so that practices can be improved. This study provides insight related to how to support student retention at Edward Waters University and those institutions with similar demographics. Additionally, the research provides specific strategies that are linked to first-generation HBCU student experiences (Engle, Bermeo, & Obrien, 2006). The research dedicated to student experience under the fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) framework is important because it highlights the built relationships fostered on a college campus which influences student retention (Miller & Bryan, 2020). Understanding the role of relational- fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) experiences- was important if we are to illustrate, improve, and replicate what supports HBCU student retention. This study revealed commonalities and/or disparate themes that emerged from the interview data analysis. The study provides insight into institutional

student retention strategies and helps close the gap between institutions' predictions or inferences that were barriers to student retention.

### **Definition of Terms**

In order to provide clarity of concepts to the reader of this dissertation, the following definitions are offered.

***Administrators.*** Administrators are considered those holding responsibility for decision-making and execution of campus policy and rules germane to the campus and all stakeholders (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kenzie, 2009).

***Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLO).*** The Black Greek Letter Organizations are the nine Greek sororities and fraternities established on the campuses of HBCUs except for one organization. These include: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. 1906 (Cornell University); Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. 1908 (Howard University); Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. 1911 (Indiana University); Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Inc. 1911 (Howard University); Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. 1913 (Howard University); Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. 1914 (Howard

University); Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. 1916; Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc. 1963 (Morgan State College now University) (Miller & Bryan, 2020; Williams, 2021).

***Campus professional.*** A campus professional is considered any person whose title/job description requires engagement with college students including faculty, staff (directors, coordinators, coaches, counselors), and administrators (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kenzie, 2009). COVID-19-Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)- COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (<https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus>).

***Department of Student Affairs (DSA).*** The Department of Student Affairs is dedicated to the factors that are responsible for supporting student success including, but not limited to, the functions of housing, on-campus activities, student health needs, and event/meeting space (Kuk & Banning, 2009).

***Fictive Kin.*** Fictive Kin is a concept that is defined as relationships, usually initiated by the students, with a faculty member based on a familial-like relationship (Nelson, 2013).

First generation/first time in college students are those whose parents have not attended college and/or have not earned a college degree (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006).

**First Time in College (FTIC).** A First Time in College refers to students who have never attended a postsecondary college or university or who has attended an institution and

earned less than twelve (12) semester credit hours of academic credit after high school graduation (Park, Woods, Hu, Bertrand Jones, & Tandberg, 2018).

***Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs)***. Historically Black Colleges and Universities are institutions established since 1837 for the initial purpose of primarily educating African Americans (Brown, 2013).

***Homecoming***. Homecoming is an annual, celebratory collegiate week-long event dedicated to student activity and engagement with current and alumni students. Events are inclusive of crowning Homecoming Royal Court (Coronation), parade, a football game (usually rival teams), tailgating, concerts, Greek step show, campus-wide cookout, live music, Hall of Fame honors, student outings, and community service (Green, 2016).

***National Council of Negro Women (NCNW)***. The National Council of Negro Woman is comprised of 300 campus and community-based sections and thirty-two national women's organizations that serves to enlighten, inspire and connect more than 2,000,000 women and men. The NCNW mission is to lead, advocate for, and empower women of African descent, their families and communities. The organization was founded by Mary McCleod Bethune in 1935 as the first national coalition of African American women's organizations (*The National Council of Negro Women, inc.*).

***Office of Student Success and Engagement (OSAE)***. The Office of Student Success and Engagement office is under the Department of Student Affairs. This office is dedicated to

creating and maintaining programs and events which engage college students (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kenzie, 2009).

***Othermothering.*** Othermothering is a concept from the literature that characterizes important relationships forged between a faculty member (as the parental figure) and their students (Griffin, 2013).

***Predominantly White institutions (PWI).*** Predominantly white institutions are institutions that have a majority population of students who identify as white (Johnson & McGowan, 2017).

***University Student Retention.*** University student retention, also referred to as persistence, is the process used to try to improve graduation rates and decrease a loss of tuition revenue via programs such as peer pressure, student academic programs, counselor and faculty monitoring, and financial and academic support (Tinto, 2005).

## **Organization of the Study**

Chapter two provides a literature review of the components integral to this study including historical information and the conceptual framework of fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffreda, 2005). Chapter three details the instrumental case study process (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) including data collection and data analysis procedures. Chapter four details the findings from the participants' interviews by looking within each participant's story and looking across participants to generate themes and assertions in

response to the research questions. Chapter five discusses the implications of the study and suggests future research.

### **Chapter Summary**

Given that HBCU student retention is influenced by the dynamics between students and faculty, students and campus events, students, and the college setting (location, environment, etc.), and how these dynamics influence student social interaction and retention (Tinto, 2005, 2017), this chapter described the importance of investigating the student experiences at HBCUs. Additionally, the conceptual framework of fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) was introduced to recognize the relational aspects associated with retention that underpin the research question: (1) How do first-generation/first-time college HBCU students enrolled between 2018 and 2022 describe their campus professional-student relationships? (2) How have the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention?

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

The study explored the HBCU student's experience to better understand how first-generation/first-time college HBCU students enrolled between 2018 and 2022 described their campus professional-student relationships and how this experience influenced their retention. To situate the research question in the literature, this chapter begins by providing the historical and situational context of access to higher education by African Americans before sharing the specific concepts of the conceptual framework. The first subsection includes the Morrill Land Grants, which allowed public institutions of higher learning to be established. Following that introduction is a historic overview of military academies, American public colleges, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The next section explores the functions of the Student Affairs division followed by the concept of retention at HBCUs along with the definition and connection of the terms home and homecoming to HBCUs. The concluding sections explore the conceptual framework of othermothering and fictive kin as well as the connection of these concepts to HBCU student experiences.

### **Higher Education Opportunities**

The following sections are important to this study to substantiate how the HBCU became so deeply rooted as a part of the African American higher education journey. The sections highlight that there were many options for education that could have been afforded to African Americans but legally, the state, private, and military colleges denied enrollment to African Americans because of race. When HBCUs were built, they were the only choice. Currently, African Americans have the opportunity to apply to any institution of their choice and HBCUs



hold strong enrollment with nearly 14% of all African American college students (Stewart et al., 2008).

**Morrill Land Grants.** Though there were private HBCUs established prior to the introduction of the Morrill Land Grants (1862, 1890), the government initiative gave each state 30,000 acres of public land to be utilized for educational purposes including state funded public colleges. The schools built were an opportunity for those in the mechanics and agricultural professions to access an affordable college education (Research guides: Morrill Act: Primary documents in American history: Introduction. Introduction - Morrill Act: Primary Documents in American History - Research Guides at Library of Congress. (n.d.). Many HBCU institutions infused the spirit of the act in the naming of their schools such as Texas A&M and Prairie View A&M. With the opportunity to earn a degree, and in some cases simply be educated, employment and living prospects expanded for those marginalized populations, such as African Americans, to change their social standing resulting in a growing economy. Key (1996) shares another tenet of the grant was the balancing of liberal arts education for the elite with engineering and farming for the working class. The idea posited is a basic understanding of the purposes of most colleges/universities which is creating an opportunity for prosperity and being of service and value to one's global community. The driving force for that rise is education was espoused in many colleges' mission statements. The nation would profit socially, educationally, and financially when its citizens were better adept at understanding and applying what they were taught in a higher education setting.

**Military Academies and Private Institutions.** Though African Americans served in wars before being emancipated, they still were prohibited from being educated in military

academies. Military academies were established in the early 1800s and, like private institutions such as Harvard University, which was established in 1636, neither were accessible to African Americans.

**American Public Colleges.** American public colleges as with the military academies and private institutions would continue the practice of barring African Americans from enrolling in their colleges. American Public Colleges have been a part of the American education system for centuries. The first American public college, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC Chapel Hill), opened for its first classes in 1795. UNC-Chapel Hill was built from slave labor and founded by William Richardson Davie who was gifted his parcel of land for his military service. It can be inferred that Davie, who was a college-educated man, comprehended the advantage of knowledge as a path to stable economic standing, the strength of college alumni, and fond experiences at his alma mater. Of note, UNC-Chapel Hill, though founded with Presbyterian principles, was built by slaves and did not admit people of color or women. This was a customary practice during the Antebellum, when buildings constructed by the labor of people of color would be legislatively prohibited from entering the building as a citizen or student. The other customary practice was gifting land to those who provided military services which was likely the predecessor to the G.I. Bill (*Frequently asked questions about UNC history*). American public colleges were the beginning of changing the economy and society of educated citizens—white males. The end of the Civil War would birth the unwritten ideology of *separate but equal*. HBCUs used the Morrill Land Grants land purchase opportunity to expand

the concept of higher education for African Americans and other disenfranchised community members.

**The HBCU.** HBCUs were born from a single idea that everyone should be educated regardless of race, religion, creed, or prior bondage as stipulated in the 13th Amendment. Four established HBCUs existed before the end of slavery, Cheyney University and Lincoln University being the first and second founded in Pennsylvania decades before the end of slavery. The third institution was Wilberforce University in Ohio in 1856, one year after Ohio became a free state; and in Raleigh, NC, Shaw University was established as the first HBCU in the south in 1865. This access to higher education provided collegiate experience to a generation of students who may have been born into slavery. These HBCU graduates created a new philosophy of pride in self and agency in education (Bracey, 2017).

Wheatle (2019) shares that though the Morrill Land Grant benefited minority-serving institutions, the paradox is that it is as exclusionary as Plessy v. Ferguson. The idea of educating non-white citizens was not an altruistic mission to fulfill the idea that “all men are created equal” as stated in the Constitution. Wheatle (2019) explains that the funding that states received for higher education institutions from the government could only be accessed with the stipulation that provisions be made to accommodate minorities to be admitted into their traditionally white institutions or the funding be utilized to build one for minorities. Esters and Strayhorn (2013) state, “HBCUs have had an ongoing commitment to educate students who are chronically underserved and have the least in terms of human and social capital” (p. 119). These are institutions where African Americans are treated as human beings capable of cognitive thought,

innovation, and the experience of being expected to achieve and contribute to the greater good of humanity.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) received governmental support in providing higher education opportunities for minorities in the form of legislation. The President's Commission on Higher Education act (1947) allowed veterans to attend college affordably. Displaced war veterans and government plan to control the dissemination of the promised funds to veterans gave way to those of lower socioeconomic status and those of other racial groups, such as Indigenous Peoples, to finally have access to attend higher education institutions (Morrill Land Grants, 1862, 1890, 1994; Higher Education Act, 1965; Burke & Johnston, 2004). HBCUs today number 101 accredited HBCUs across nineteen states, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands. HBCUs represent 3% of all 4-year, non-profit institutions. However, they enroll 10% of all African American students in America with a high concentration of those institutions in the southern region of the United States (uncf.org).

HBCUs have a rich history of impacting millions of Americans searching for an education, primarily African American students. According to [www.uncf.org](http://www.uncf.org), "In general, HBCUs boasts an impressive success rate when it comes to retaining and graduating first-generation, low-income African American students...[and] the cost of attendance is...28% less than attending a comparable non-HBCU." The key to understanding the historical context for this study is establishing the reasons American public colleges and HBCUs were established. American public colleges were originally designed for the position and success of wealthy, white, males. However, after fighting in a world war, Heller (2011) shares that heightened

numbers of soldiers requested access to their earned funds which included education. This happened at a time when both employment and the economy needed stimulation. HBCUs were able to provide a service to those minorities of all genders, any economic, or military status to attend an institution dedicated to ensuring they received an opportunity to be a part of the academy.

Esters and Strayhorn (2013) conducted research about demystifying the connection between public land-grants and HBCUs. Their findings include that HBCUs were established since 1837, (prior to the Morrill Land Grant, 1862) and perspectives from other researchers about the culture and students' motivation in attending HBCUs. Esters and Strayhorn (2013) share from Evans, Evans, and Evans (2002) that HBCUs continue as top school selections for African American students. Esters and Strayhorn (2013) further states, "Many Black students choose to attend HBCUs for cultural and academic motives. Others are attracted to the rich legacy that HBCUs provide" (Freeman and Thomas, 2002, p. 121). HBCUs did and continue to do what underserved communities have always done with scraps. HBCUs make meals that feed generations. HBCUs created a space where African Americans can have access to quality education in a safe atmosphere.

Recognizing the power of HBCUs to provide access to a quality education, Arroyo and Gasman (2014) and Kamens (1974) share that student retention and persistence is influenced by institutional image, reputation, and social prestige of an institution. This study focuses on the relationships that are built within a safe atmosphere between students and campus professionals at an HBCU and if those connections influence a student's decision to remain at a given institution. To support the student experience, each HBCU has a Department of Student Affairs

that oversees the student experience. The department not only houses the campus student engagement activities but also is tasked with understanding and strengthening student retention. The following section will explore this department further.

### **First Generation/First Time in College Students**

First generation/first time college students are an easily identifiable student population that are tracked by institutions when reporting engagement, retention, and attrition. Tym, McMillion, Barone, and Webster (2004) define first-generation/first-time in college students (FTIC) as those whose parents did not attend college. Tym et al. (2004) adds that FTIC students whose parents did not attend college are less prepared in understanding how to apply for college, less prepared financially and academically for college, and have difficulty once they are enrolled in college in comparison to those students whose parents attended college. Tym et al.'s (2004) identified FTIC students as having access issues, retention issues, and benefitting from college intervention efforts. Tym et al. (2004), Choy (2001), and Thayer (2000) suggest that first generation college students have limited preparation and access to collegiate-level academics or experiences prior to entering college. According to Tym et al. (2004), some of the characteristics of first-generation college students include but are not limited to being an older student, having lower incomes, and being less likely to attend college full-time. The research conducted by Tym et al. (2004) and (Choy, 2001) indicates that FTIC students are less likely to return to college even if they complete their first year of college. This fact impacts the students' integration or lack of integration into the collegiate culture.

Engle, Bermeo, and O'Brien (2006) offer similar information related to first-generation/first-time college students as compared to those whose parents attended college. In

describing FTIC students, Engle et al. (2006) share that there are: (1) a higher percentage of females compared to males, (2) many FTIC students from minority backgrounds and/or have parents born outside of the U.S. where English may not be their native language, (3) many who may not have financial support from family, and (4) students who may need remediation. Engle et al. (2006) also shared from student responses that although entry to higher education was a challenge, students also found, “it is much more difficult to stay in college than it is to get in” (p. 27). However, pre-college programs did aid in their preparation for college academically and socially.

The first-generation/first time in college student information presented provides context for understanding the characteristics of FTIC students, some of the opportunities for their growth, and determining the type of participants who will partake in this study. This information also provides a perspective of the roles that the HBCU institution provides in supporting this unique demographic of students. Aruguete (2017) share FTIC have challenges in grades, critical thinking and their social engagement was said to be low. Additionally, “being separated from family and feeling a low sense of belongingness on campus...first generation students may quickly feel marginalized” (p. 42). Given the additional complexity of entry and persistence associated with FTIC students, the HBCU and the student affairs division may be positioned to address the gaps through engagement and relationship-building within the familial setting of the HBCU. The following sections of student affairs division and retention at HBCU add more to

understanding the roles the HBCU plays in engaging the first generation/first time in college students.

### **Student Affairs Division**

The Student Affairs division on college campuses is an important one. They create programming for student activities, leadership opportunities, and manage organizations that they can join to foster social, political, and career connections (Hypolite, 2020). Hypolite (2020) shares how Black Cultural Centers (BCC) have been a part of Historically White Institutions (HWIs) for African Americans and are housed under the Department of Student Affairs. A BCC is not necessary at an HBCU, however, the services that a BCC offers are still important programming for African American students. There is still a need for students to have a space on campus to spend their social capital by exploring at least two of the three tenets cited by Hypolite (2020): a) strategically coordinating resources and relationships among Black organizations to meet the needs of the Black community, and b) collaborating with peer cultural/identity centers to streamline efforts (p. 3).

Organizations such as the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) offer opportunities for membership for professionals and college students. A portion of their mission statement touts, “it is an organization of organizations (comprised of 300 campus and community-based sections and 32 national women’s organizations)...its mission is to lead, advocate for, and empower women of African descent, their families, and communities” (*The National Council of Negro Women, inc.*).

Student Affairs organizational charts and programs across PWIs and HBCUs with high student retention rates, (e.g. Duke University, Howard University, The University of Florida),



share in common the following programs central to student success and engagement: counseling and wellness, risk management, dining services, housing and residential life, career services, student organizations, new student programming, student activities, and athletics. There are services that each institution provides that are unique to their respective campuses however the aforementioned are the standard in what is provided to offer support to students. The Student Affairs division is guided by national standards to ensure that policies and required legislation such as Title IX are implemented in each department. The standards are housed with the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (*Standards. CAS (n.d.)*). The guidelines provided in CAS aid Student Affairs professionals in demonstrating their role and understanding that the college experience is part and parcel of the activities, programming, and organizations that allow for anchoring students to the institution with positive connections.

According to Ludeman and Strange (2009), effective programming aligned with strategic planning and anchored in common values, basic principles, and beliefs makes for an efficient office of Student Affairs. The Student Affairs division within the HBCU vets and fosters partnerships with organizations such as the NCNW to enhance student experiences as outlined in the standards of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. The Student Affairs division develops and implements events that highlight the empowerment of gender, cultural, and religious identity by partnering with professionals in the community, faculty, and staff members. Hirt et al. (2006; 2008) share the nature of Student Affairs at HBCUs from the professional perspective with the understanding that student experiences are important to the retention factor. As shared by Tinto (2017), the CAS design guides Student Affairs divisions to actively and intentionally seek professionals who subscribe to the ideology of building

meaningful relationships with students. Those built relationships in the counseling center, student leadership and mentoring programs, and places to fortify student-agency such as the student government association serve as a microcosm of the real world where students can practice and prepare with academic, professional, and socio-economic support (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Ludeman & Strange, 2009; Kuh et al., 2007). These relationships can only occur if the students remain at the institutions for the relationships to grow.

### **Retention at HBCUs**

This study sought to understand the HBCU student experiences and the influence those experiences played in their retention. Some factors that influence higher education student retention rates at Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) include finances (tuition affordability; low socio-economic status), first-generation attendees, intellectual differences, physical disabilities, faculty and staff engagement, and accessible student programs (Jarzombek et al., 2017; O’Keeffe, 2013). HBCUs, included in MSIs, have the added disadvantage of lower financial support from endowments and government funding therefore the necessary budgetary items such as student services and academic staffing are not comparable to PWIs which can impact methods colleges can utilize to retain students (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005). Studies have been conducted to disaggregate the factors which influence retention rates. Influences on retention included such factors as student agency and motivation (Schuetz, 2008), roles of institutional

structures and cultures (Porter, 2006), the way educators practice and relate to their students (Kuh, 2001; Umbach and Wawrzynski, 2005).

In response to retention challenges, Zepke and Leach (2010) offer research perspectives for retaining students rooted in student engagement such as:

- a) Motivation and agency—engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise agency,
- b) Transactional engagement—students and teachers engage with each other,
- c) Institutional support—institutions provide an environment conducive to learning, and
- d) Active citizenship—students and institutions work together to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices (p. 169).

These perspectives reflect the type of students which can be found on a college campus. Although some students will persist despite obstacles (motivation and agency), others will gravitate to human connectivity and relationships. In particular, the transactional agreement and active citizenship seem to connect to the relational qualities of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) which will be explored later in this chapter. This position is supported by Tym et al. (2004), who shares from Thayer (2000), “...first-generation and low-income students may be among those at highest risk of dropping out...effective retention strategies [that are] multifaceted...will assist students in developing a sense of social security accompanied by a sense of academic competence” (p. 17-18). The following section will share some of the mainstays of HBCU student engagement settings including the concept of home and

homecoming where othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) are activated.

### **Home and Homecoming**

The concept of home and homecoming are key elements of the HBCU experience. The definition of home will vary with any person requested to define it or describe an associated emotion with the word as exemplified by the six current online Merriam-Webster definitions of home (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/home>), each with its sub-definitions. When the word home is defined with a positive qualifier, it stands to reason that returning to home or homecoming conjures memories of love and safety even if there are memories of emotions such as anxiety, fear, worry, and stress. The love and safety emotions outweigh all and compels one to return home with more anticipation than hesitation. Kidd and Evans (2011) share the definition of home, as narrated to them by houseless youths, as a state of mind or physical place as in contrast to being houseless.

College students in some respects leave home to reside in another home (residence hall) while others are categorized by the traditional definition of not having a living residence. These two experiences of being houseless are different and therefore their experiences would differ. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model (see appendix A) depicts the importance of images like home that address the needs of security, love, and belonging. As posited by Ryan, Coppola, Canyon, Brickhouse, and Swienton (2020), the lived experiences of college students before and during one's collegiate years coupled with the added psychological impact of isolation brought on by the global pandemic COVID-19 have made these needs even more visible and challenged the norms associated with the abstract construct of home.

In addition to the concept of home, homecoming is an equally important part of the HBCU student experience. According to the current Merriam-Webster online dictionary, homecoming is “the return of a group of people usually on a special occasion to a place formerly frequented or regarded as home especially an annual celebration for alumni at a high school, college, or university” ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com)). The event of Homecoming develops and solidifies over one’s tenure at an institution with a culmination of experiences. Homecoming creates a space where the mission component of an institution can develop allowing students to cultivate a sense of kinship. Kinship helps to build the student's commitment to the mission.

An example of this kinship development is sharing an alma mater which usually includes in the lyrics a sense of commitment and obligation to ensure the institution thrives and remains a safe home for other students in the future. As a part of this mission, alums demonstrate that sense of commitment and obligation through recruitment efforts, instilling the importance of legacy by ensuring their children attend their alma mater, becoming active and financial members of their alumni association, and attending homecoming celebrations annually at their alma mater (Johnson & McGowan, 2017). The definitions of home and homecoming provide a perspective of safety that students feel when attending HBCUs and events like Homecoming with others who have had the HBCU experience. Following this premise, the next section shares a conceptual framework for understanding the r campus professional-student relationship.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of this study, othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013), place student experience as the nucleus with engagement and programming as key influencers to retention. Relationships based in othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive

kin (Nelson, 2013) are part of the college experience that may influence students to stay in college; otherwise known as retention. Retention is a collective act from all sections of the office of Student Success and Engagement that focuses on keeping students engaged and active in the collegiate environment. Tinto (2020) shares that academic integration and social integration are two main factors why students remain at college. In its role, the office of Student Success and Engagement provides services such as tutoring (academic), clubs/organizations (social), and counseling (interpersonal) which support student retention. Engagement, at the higher education level, is the lynchpin between retention and persistence. Shappie and Debb (2019) propose that student engagement should be viewed from a “multi-dimensional construct” of behavioral, affective, and cognitive components for student success.

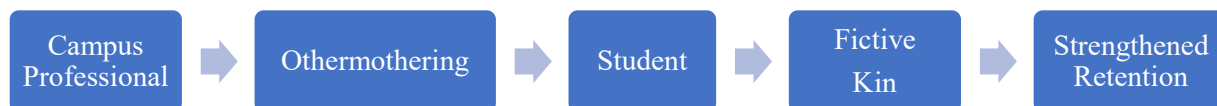
Student success and ultimately retention requires students to remain actively attuned and connected to academic and social activities with a goal of matriculation. Shappie and Debb’s (2019) work specifically highlights the importance of engagement and relationships at HBCUs which is key to the retention equation. According to Baker et. al (2018), although the conclusions drawn from the drop-out research have also been applied to HBCUs, more “nuanced research” focused on retention for the student populations at HBCUs is needed. The vantage point of said research identifies persistence drawn from the holistic student success process as including such factors as achievement, identity formation, and values cultivation (p. 5). Drawing on this work, the role of the office of Student Success and Engagement at HBCUs has evidentiary support for the initiatives they implement for retention at their institutions. However, understanding how students experience the programming of the office of student engagement coupled with the nature of the built relationships will help strengthen HBCU retention related work. Under the

framework of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013), this study will provide further research related to the student experience and retention.

### **Othermothering and Fictive Kin**

The framework of this study is based on othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013). Othermothering is best described as those relationships forged between a faculty member (as the parental figure) and their students (Griffin, 2013). Fictive kin is best described as relationships, usually initiated by the students with a faculty member based on a familial-like relationship (Nelson, 2013). Although often considered a positive quality, Nelson (2013), Griffin (2013), Braithwaite et al. (2016) each also have identified negative connotations associated with the term fictive in that it infers that the relationship formed is not real. For this work I refer to fictive kin or othermothering as professional relationships between faculty and/or staff with students that are not biologically or legally established nor recognized as family members.

The literature suggests that the experiences of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) are more prevalent at HBCUs than at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). Nelson (2013) shares the perspective of Johnson (2000) that African Americans more commonly engage in and value a family or tribal family dynamic. Though the work of Nelson (2013) and Johnson (2000) emerges from African American experiences at PWIs, the focus of this study will explore the HBCU students' experience. McLeod (2007) investigated the HBCU setting and posits that Maslow's model depicting the physiological need for humans to connect with others is just as strong in the academic setting. Navigating a college campus and its norms is more easily traversed when one is aligned with another person or group especially if there are common values, interests, or understanding of the world.

**Figure 2.1. Conceptual Framework**

Although students and campus professionals can actively engage in mentor-like relationships without crossing personal boundaries into a familial state—such as referring to each other as brother or mom, the figure above provides an illustration of how the concepts of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) work interdependently toward student retention. The figure can also be interpreted to depict the campus professional engaging in othermothering, a model of specific behavior of action and in an environment of safety which fosters the opportunity for students to then engage in fictive kin almost as a function of the othermothering leading to strengthened student retention. However, when the concepts are merged, they enhance and strengthen student retention and thereby create a method of visualizing the framework in action.

When considering othermothering in tandem with fictive kin as the framework, the term is not gender specific. Mothering, in this sense, is synonymous with terms such as *in loco parentis* (in the place of a parent) utilized in the K-12 setting when referencing the relationship/responsibility of educators to students. Griffin (2013) offers, “While there were time and energy costs, participants also cited personal and professional benefits associated with student interaction, including social rapport, research insights, and connecting them to their communities in meaningful ways” (p.169). It is the benefits of the interaction that this study focuses on including the gains that are to be had from building the relationships between students and professionals at a given institution who support student persistence in their college



career. Guiffrida (2005) shares, based on findings from (Hurtado, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Renson, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000) that “quantitative measures alone have failed to capture the complexities involved in understanding the experiences of minority college students.” His study, supported by Talburt (2004) and Terenzini and Pascarella (1991), sought to “uncover patterns in students’ perceptions of relationships with faculty” to inform future research instead of confirming those findings. This study seeks to add to the body of research by describing student experiences that influence their retention through the othermothering framework.

The relationships forged between students and faculty, or staff are intentional at HBCUs and viewed as an unspoken responsibility between both parties with shared expectations.

Bernard et al. (2012) found that the work goes beyond that of mentorship; the authors present “othermothering in the academy... [as a] sharing of self, an interactive and collective process, a spiritual connectedness that exemplifies the Afrocentric value of sharing, caring, and accountability” (p. 105-106). This also speaks to the familial culture ever-present at HBCUs.

The research shared by Rodgers and Summers (2008) provides the perspective that the familial connectedness of students of color with faculty of color is a behavior that is more prevalent within the African American culture than that of other races, specifically in contrast to Caucasian students at PWIs. A portion of their study focused on the othermothering concept at PWIs wherein authors revised the retention models of Tinto (1998) and Bean and Eaton (2000) to better understand how and why retention patterns are higher at HBCUs than at PWIs. One of the assumptions of Rodgers and Summers (2008), was that the, “HBCUs were providing something that the PWIs were not...something that strongly aids in the retention process” (p. 184). That “something” can be described as a non-contractual duty that African American faculty

and/or staff feel toward other African American students more so when they both are in a minority as shared in the research of Rodgers and Summers (2008). Faculty and/or staff often feel a sense of obligation toward their students to help them thrive in environments where they are in the minority such as PWIs. This study will demonstrate that the non-contractual duty to “serve and protect”, borrowing the familiar phrase, is just as strong at HBCUs.

Mawhinney (2012), shares in her peer-reviewed personal narrative, her student-teacher experiences as a faculty member at a PWI after teaching for several years at an HBCU and her experiences with students at an HBCU. She shares, “There is an identity switch when teaching at an HBCU” (p. 214). Furthermore, teaching at an HBCU one comes to understand that educating students is inescapably tied to the mission of the institution. Most notably and directly related to this study and the framework of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) is the concept of family. Mawhinney (2012) supports her position by sharing, “Schools that are centered in the Black experience are focused on the whole development...where the teacher was concerned about the cognitive, physical, and psychological needs of the student” (Siddle Walker & Tompkins, 2004). Though the work of Siddle Walker and Tompkins (2004) spoke primarily to younger students, the concept of familial obligation is applicable to faculty and staff members in higher education where the dynamics of campus professional to student share a similar racial make-up. Mawhinney (2012) adds to her position by citing the argument from Noddings (1988, 2005), “the ethic of care is maternal in nature...and that the responsibility of caregiver often falls onto the teacher” (p. 214).

Mawhinney (2012) is candid about the benefits and challenges of engaging in othermothering as defined by Guiffrida (2005) along with Hirt et. al (2008) specifically about

setting and adhering to boundaries with her students regarding how much accessibility of her time she allowed. However, her experiences as a campus professional who engaged in othermothering as outlined by Guiffrida (2005) is exactly the types of behaviors that are demonstrated between campus professionals and students at HBCUs and can influence student retention choices.

Studies show that students share positive experiences with campus professionals. Guiffrida (2005) found that student interview results yielded responses such as “student-centered” and “going above and beyond” when describing relationships with faculty and academic advisors (p. 707-708). Though ethical in their approach, the faculty and staff members would employ wrap-around services by inquiring about student needs other than academics such as career aspirations, their social confidence in the campus environment, and being a listening ear when students shared personal concerns about their family, friends, or their well-being. These findings further support the othermothering framework as a salient lens from which to study student experiences. Their perspective will be value-added to institutions that seek to understand why students stay and possibly methods to employ or avoid when combating attrition rates.

Other scholars have employed othermothering framework in similar contexts. For example, Guiffrida (2005) used the othermothering framework to understand African American students’ definition of student-centered faculty. The aspiration to understand student experiences makes Guiffrida’s research seminal as Guiffrida sought to understand from the students’ perspective “the faculty characteristics that facilitate meaningful relationships with African American students” (p. 703). This study moves beyond Guiffrida by seeking to understand if the built relationships also influence their retention choices. Guiffrida shared research that though

African Americans who attended PWIs did not experience built relationships with White faculty beyond the classroom and engaged in academic campus activities far less than their counterparts who were non-minorities, those who did were still dissatisfied with their interactions and perceived faculty as culturally insensitive. Guiffreda additionally shares that from the students' perspective their interactions with non-minority faculty members were not fruitful because they did not view the faculty as realistic role models. They also found some as culturally insensitive if their curriculum was not inclusive of diverse representation. These findings highlight that a relationship with a faculty member or campus professional is not enough of an expectation from students. Rather, the frame of the relationship and development of that relationship was what students perceived as beneficial. The students appreciated the relationships where efforts were made to grow the relationship.

Bernard et. al (2012), unlike Guiffreda (2005) and Tinto (2017), shared perspectives from both academic professionals and students. Specifically, Bernard et. al. offered a unique perspective on those researchers who use othermothering as a framework for their studies. They indicated that researchers are usually African American females, are already engaged in othermothering in their academies, and may feel an academic and cultural responsibility to perform academically as exemplars for their students. Bernard et. al also assert that there are challenges in othermothering as derived from their interviews with participants. Though the participants gave honest accounts of their interactions, they wanted to ensure there was not an unrealistic expectation that other professionals or students would have exact results. Bernard et. al (2012) shared that participants were concerned about demonstrating a false reality of how

professionals in other settings may engage them (students)—with less support and availability than they have experienced.

The researchers also spoke about the growth points that occurred as a result of those participants utilizing othermothering relationships. Bernard et. al. (2012) extends their findings to include positive attributes of othermothering which are demonstrated through transformative measures. These transformative measures include campus professionals observing students understand the importance of community investment as a social movement for collective change and giving of time through service. The institution is transformed when [it has] “a more diverse student body, faculty, and staff...[to] help...to recruit and retain even more students from marginalized communities” (Bernard et. al, 2012, p. 116). Lastly, Bernard et. al. posits that the positive outcomes of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) can only manifest when the relationship between the campus professional and student is authentic.

Fictive kin relationships emerge in a variety of ways. Ibsen and Klobus (1972) were among the first to introduce the concept of fictive kin. In their study, they shared that anthropologists and sociologists, scientists that study human societal norms, included consanguineal and affinal along with fictive kin as terms to describe the societal relationships. Ibsen and Klobus (1972) also shared that there was not enough empirical data, during their era, on the use of fictive kin in American society. However, it was an opportunity for future researchers to develop. The data relating to fictive kin over the years has increased substantially. However, its use as a framework still has space for more research—hence its use in this study. Lastly, Ibsen and Klobus (1972) state, “fictive kin term use as recognition of status change, a form or symbolic expression, or validation of a personal relationship, are interdependent

explanations” (p. 617). This notion leads to understanding what some current types of fictive kin may be and how they are used. These varieties as shared below, are examples of multiple perspectives students may utilize when forming fictive kin relationships. The terms below share the various degrees to which those who engage in fictive kin will participate—keeping the students’ experience at the forefront of this study. The terms also provide context for the reader regarding the researcher’s use of the terms within this study. Braithwaite et al. (2016) share varying dynamics of fictive kin relationships (they term fictive kin as voluntary kin though the definition is synonymous):

*Intertwined Triad:* The blood/legal or biolegal family and voluntary kin relate to the student/participant as the linchpin (which will define the student for this section). The information and communication are usually positive and disseminated by all participants.

*Limited Triad:* The three stakeholders, (the student/participant, campus professional, and biolegal family) are the same but the connection and communication between the fictive kin and the biolegal are limited. The engagement between the linchpin and the biolegal is strong. The engagement between the linchpin and fictive kin is strong.

*Separate Triad:* The three stakeholders are the same. The engagement between the linchpin and the biolegal is strong. The engagement between the linchpin and fictive kin is strong. There is no engagement between the biolegal and the fictive kin.

*Hostile Triad:* The three stakeholders are the same. The engagement between the linchpin and the biolegal is strong. The engagement between the linchpin and fictive kin is strong. There is negative engagement between the biolegal and the fictive kin (Braithwaite et al., 2016, p. 621).

Recognizing this typology, Braithwaite et al. (2016) describe relationships in an academic setting as an “intertwined relationship [with] some shared similarities to the extended family...to form one cohesive system” (p. 620). College can be difficult socially and/or academically. Having a familial type of safety for conversations or support contributes to students persevering through their academic journey.

Nelson (2013) drew a distinction from studies initiated by Chatters et al. (1994) and Braithwaite et al. (2010) to introduce situational kin and ritual kin. *Situational kin* is defined as relationships that develop based on a set of circumstances that have the participant/student “spatially or temporarily absent” from their biolegal family, i.e., away at college. Nelson (2013) shares six variables of situational kin:

*Convenience Kin*: relations that emerge in marginal settings (shelters; neighborhoods)

*Institutional Kin*: relations that emerge in total institutions (hospitals; group homes; prisons)

*Caregiving Kin*: relations that emerge in paid care (homes; institutions)

*Ritual Kin*: relations that emerge as a part of customary practice (family; ritual occasions)

*Organizational Kin*: relations that emerge in voluntary organizations (fraternities; sororities)

*Intentional Kin*: relations that emerge from choice and intention (daily life) (p. 266).

The *organizational* and *intentional kin* variables are the two components that undergird this study’s exploration of the collegiate student experience and the impact of relationships on student persistence. Nelson (2013) as informed by Kim (2009, 2012), McAdoo (2007), and Sunday (2007) posits that *organizational kin* engenders kinlike relationships. From this study,

sororal and fraternal organizations that are under the umbrella of Student Affairs programming lend themselves to the family-like bond wherein participants choose to be aligned as brothers and sisters. The *intentional kin* references the voluntary engagement with those who are not connected in a family-like way such as Godparents-not biolegal. Nelson (2013), as informed by Braithwaite et al. (2010) shares:

These relationships do not happen by random or chance...these relationships may persist over time...may develop complexities so that they feel neither voluntary nor chosen at particular moments (even though individuals are free to leave them) and are sustained through action (p. 269).

The types of fictive kin shared in the previous section, such as *intentional* and *situational kin*, demonstrate the layers assigned to the concept and the multiple perspectives from which researchers have presented the information. These types of fictive kin are shared in this study because there is not a singular construct to fit every participant and every situation when one is studying individual student experiences; they will all be different.

In this study, I focus on situational kin with the goal of beginning to surface the activities and behaviors present in this type of relationship. College students are the focus. However, other researchers have applied fictive kin to their research. Tierney and Venegas (2006) studied high school students using fictive kin as their conceptual framework stating, “a fictive kin framework uses a cultural ecological approach to understanding a peer group” (p. 1691). The peer group of campus professionals and college students of an HBCU is similar to the peer group they used with high school students and college counselors. Specifically, they studied the peer group to understand how their relationship impacted the high school students’ navigation of the college



admission process and the process of paying for college which can be a daunting task. In some cases, campus professionals and college students mirror those circumstances when working to maintain their attendance in college or while applying to graduate school.

One of the tenets for future implications of research that Tierney and Venegas (2006) share, is “the ability of schools to develop intentional groups...to initiate ongoing interactions with a knowledgeable adult about college has the potential to lead to an increase in access to college” (p. 1701). This study builds on this tenet of forming intentional groups with the fictive kin relationships, which may lead to an increase in their retention. Another nuance of the phenomena of fictive kin/voluntary kin is though it is not germane to any one race, it has been observed more prevalently in the African American community whether at PWIs or HBCUs as a means of collective support to persist in the collegiate experience (Braithwaite et al., 2010, 2016; Nelson, 2010, 2013).

The connection between fictive kin and culture has been shared in the previous sections. At HBCUs, those that are private have a religious affiliation especially those founded by religious persons as shared in the history of HBCUs. Though the religious aspect of Edward Waters University is African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.), it is not highlighted. It is being mentioned here only as an acknowledgment that there are fictive kin aspects of those who are participants in religious groups. Brooks and Allen (2016) utilized fictive kin as their framework in association with religiosity in their study of what influences students to remain at HBCUs and the students’ perception of African American culture. The findings from Brooks and Allen (2016) are integral to this study in that they share, “Building meaningful relationships early in their collegiate experience is an important factor in their commitment to remaining at a

university” (p. 830). This idea is supported by the work done with the TRIO students. Brooks and Allen (2016) further share that the relationships between campus professionals and students:

Particularly those at historically Black colleges and universities might use the findings to develop or enhance first year and transition programs for students [which] may include information on the significance of faculty mentoring, establishing relationships in the surrounding community, and encouraging student participation in campus organizations and activities (p. 830).

The work of Brooks and Allen (2016) and their findings serve as a springboard for this study as it pertains to the fictive kin relationships between campus professionals and students at Edward Waters University.

Nelson defined fictive kin by outlining who are the participants and why they engage in fictive kin (2013). Nelson added that though fictive kin was a fairly new concept it required streamlining in its definition. In another study, Nelson (2014) sought to share the intricacies of communication between voluntary kin (VK) and biolegal family (BLF) when one participant is the lynchpin between the two groups. Nelson found that these groups were more in alignment in non-academic settings and the participants were linked biolegally or in some cases by non-bio-legal roles such as a Godparent. Nelson (2014) asserts that “researchers and practitioners...consider the place of VK relationships within a larger family system” and “consider the ways hierarchy is constructed and maintained...to help linchpins, VK, and BLF negotiate the most functional relationships possible” (p. 628).

Presenting typologies to describe the relationships of fictive kin and othermothering allows the reader and researcher to understand the focus on relationships. However, we know less about the specific behaviors or actions associated with developing these relationships.

### **Chapter Summary**

There are two components of student engagement to consider. Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) state, “The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success” (p. 412). Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) espouse the idea that there is connectedness between students, faculty, staff, programming, engagement, and retention. Therefore, it is about the effort that both the campus professional and student put into building the relationship that impacts the experience. The literature suggests the importance of investigating HBCU student experiences to understand if or how their experiences influence retention. The literature in this study shares the importance of engagement, programs, retention, the institutions of HBCUs, and colleges in general. It also highlights the importance of the built relationships between students and faculty and staff as demonstrated by the review of fictive kin and othermothering framework. There is an opportunity to add to the body of knowledge of how relationships may or may not influence student retention by gathering information from students themselves. The information gathered answered the question of what experiences with campus professional-student relationships challenged or facilitated their retention. Additionally, although the conceptual frameworks of fictive kin and othermothering allows the reader and researcher to understand the focus on

relationships, this study offers the opportunity to identify and illustrate specific behaviors or actions associated with developing these relationships.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The literature review in Chapter Two provided a foundation for understanding the HBCU student experience and why relationships may be key to retention. The components were understanding the context and history of HBCU student experience, understanding entities and events that provide opportunities for student experiences, and lastly analyzing the aforementioned retention influencers through othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) conceptual frameworks. The conclusion drawn from the research is that scholars could benefit from a first-hand account of HBCU student experiences with a specific focus on the nature of relationships. Understanding the fictive kin/othermothering experiences at EWU is important to illustrate, improve, and provide insight for other HBCUs interested in enhancing student retention.

This instrumental case study emerged from the researcher's HBCU observational experiences which demonstrated the power and impact of built relationships on first-generation/first-time college EWU students. To explore the HBCU student experience, a qualitative research methodology informed by Creswell (2009) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) was conducted. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) share, "Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (p. 23). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) state, "A central characteristic of all qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in

interaction with their social worlds. Constructivism thus underlies ...a basic qualitative study” (p. 24).

Student interaction with others and the relationships that they develop through a variety of campus events, the classroom, and student organization meetings provide HBCU students important opportunities to interact and develop relationships. These relationships cultivated influence the student experiences. To better understand the needs of the Edward Waters University context, I included interviews with Edward Waters University administrators in Academic and Student Affairs. Their participation was critical as they provided additional insight into the EWU cultural context and the importance of investigating this problem of practice- the student experience- with a focus on the concepts of fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005). Their willingness to share their insights demonstrated their understanding that this study’s focus was important to the campus community. These voices are shared as a part of Chapter 3 to provide the reader a deeper understanding of the research context.

### **Research Questions**

To better understand the campus-professional-student relationships, the overarching research question guiding this study is: (1) How do first-generation/first-time college HBCU students enrolled between 2018 and 2022 describe their campus professional-student relationships? (2) How have the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention? This study helps higher education professionals and students better understand how relationships support first-generation/first-time college HBCU student experiences and how those relational experiences (Park, Woods, Hu, Bertrand Jones, &

Tandberg, 2018) and influence retention. Additionally, the study provides the EWU community insight into how nurtured relationships enhance student retention.

### **Research Design**

This research utilizes the qualitative instrumental case study methodology. An instrumental case study utilizes specific cases to gain insight into a particular issue or theory. There are various types of case studies and Yazan (2015) offers a compilation review of Yin (2002), Stake (1995), and Merriam's (1998) approach to case study. The instrumental case study also helps with the identification of commonalities and differences of participants within the boundaries defining a case (Stake, 1995). The commonalities of a case study often include a focus on an individual phenomenon that is complex and that is bounded (Yazan, 2015). Boblin et al. (2013) describe instrumental case study methodology based on definition shared by Stake (2005); the single instrumental case study includes the following characteristics: bounded by time, location, and phenomenon and a holistic approach to understanding the phenomenon (Boblin et. al, 2013). This case study included the dynamics of an instrumental case study primarily as shared by Stake (1995).

This study utilized the bounded location (Boblin et. al, 2013) of Edward Waters University and because it allowed for the flexibility of the bounded time which in this study bracketed the years 2018 through 2022. The location also allowed for the requisite time to conduct the interviews with the participants and the time to reflect on their experiences from a specific year over several weeks. Included in the methodology is the interview portion of the study. Creswell (2009) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) describe interview methodology as key to a basic qualitative study. deMarrais and Lapan (2003) share, "Qualitative interviews are used

when researchers want to gain in-depth knowledge from participants about particular phenomena, experiences, or set of experiences” (p. 52). The authors continue that, “this can only be accomplished when the qualitative interview is open-ended enough for the participant to provide a depth of knowledge on the research topic” (p. 52). Furthermore, those researchers also stated, “The intent is to discover that person’s view of experience or phenomena of study” (p. 52). This study uses an instrumental case study design to gain insights into the phenomenon of how relationships influenced the student experience and, ultimately, retention. In the instrumental case, the focus is learning the relationship between the student professional and the student experience. In sum, the rationale for selecting an instrumental case study as a methodology is that it allows for the use of student narratives to be voiced and shared to expand the understanding of how mentor-like relationships influence their retention at a small private HBCU.

In this study, HBCU campus professional-student relationships are the experience or phenomena being investigated with a particular emphasis on understanding relationships defined by fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005). The research design of this investigation includes site selection, participant selection, data collection, analysis of the data, rigor guidelines, participant confidentiality, ethical concerns, and researcher positionality. The chapter concludes with a summary.

### **Site Selection**

There are HBCUs in the United States located as far west as Texas and as far north as Pennsylvania. The HBCUs in the south have the added historical significance of being founded in former slave states such as Florida and built by former slaves as shared in Chapter Two. The



HBCU site was purposefully selected as defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2015). The selected institution was chosen based on the following criteria: the distinction of being a Historically, Black College or University (HBCU) and categorized as a private institution. The purposefully selected institution for this study was Edward Waters University where the researcher is employed. The direct access to the campus, students, and the professionals in both Academic and Student Affairs departments made the selection a prime choice for the study. The researcher has years of being a participant observer at the institution and was able to provide a perspective of campus culture and a deeper exploration of the organization HBCU students experience through the othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) conceptual framework.

The built relationships with Edward Waters University administrators allowed the researcher to cultivate a summary of the shared interest in strengthening the student experience as shared in Researcher Positionality (Creswell, 2009). Edward Waters University (EWU) is a small private, HBCU affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church. Edward Waters College was the first HBCU established in the state of Florida in 1866 and transitioned to university status in 2021([www.ewc.edu](http://www.ewc.edu)). Although EWU has a long history, Edward Waters University's retention rate in the year 2020 was 54% which was lower than its peers (73%) (*Edward Waters College*). The disappointing retention rate signaled the researcher to engage in conversations with leadership at the institution to investigate how to better support students in their student experience. The EWU's small population of under 1,000 students and the researcher's intimate knowledge of the campus culture and population created a context where an understanding of relationships was deeply and contextually explored.

The campus culture of HBCUs includes the location, people, activities, and expectations of the people, and this culture is often guided or influenced by the institutional leaders. As a result, a brief conversation was independently held with two EWU administrators in Academic Affairs and Student Affairs who described the EWU campus culture and student experience. They became thought partners to help the researcher think about HBCU student relationships as an important problem of practice. As thought partners with the researcher and stakeholders who engaged in student experience, it was important to have connected administrators share their perspectives of the student experience at Edward Waters University. The following section summarizes the 45-minute interviews held with Dr. Stephanie Campbell and Dr. Jame'l R. Hodges, respectively.

**Administrative Discussion 1.** *“Once you know your ‘why,’ you’ll know your way”*-Dr. Stephanie Campbell. This quote emerged from a discussion with the current Dean of Operations and Academic Student Success for Edward Waters University. Dr. Campbell previously served as the Associate Provost of Academic Affairs. In this discussion, Dr. Campbell shared her experiences with HBCUs as it relates to this study. Dr. Campbell attended Florida State University (FSU) as one of the first cohorts to integrate into the institution. She was not a first-generation college student. Though her mother attended an HBCU, her parents influenced her to be a part of the integration movement. Florida Agricultural and Mechanics University (FAMU), was the nearby HBCU where she could find a kinship with other African Americans and have a pseudo-HBCU experience by attending their athletic games, homecoming activities, and other social events. She also shared that her fictive kin/othermothering experience occurred on the FSU campus with one of the few African American professionals on the campus at the time. The

positive experience with fellowshipping at FAMU and the fictive kin/othermothering experience at FSU provided the foundation for her decision to serve her tenure at Edward Waters University.

Dr. Campbell shared that in addition, the academic experience in her prior career in law enforcement motivated her to choose a career where she could help guide students to make better decisions before they succumbed to the belief that crime was their only way out. At Edward Waters University she shared that she makes herself available to students and spends time with them to provide them with a plan or help them develop a plan for success. She offered that it is important to see the students for who they are and when campus professionals engage the students, the students no longer feel invisible. It changes the students' experience for the better knowing that there are people who care whether they are academically successful, healthy, and safe.

The aligned interest in fictive kin and othermothering evidenced in my conversation with an institutional leader demonstrates the contextual readiness of EWU for exploring this research questions and the utility of the findings related to understanding relationships as an important problem of practice. Dr. Campbell is explicitly interested in the findings from this instrumental case study and how they can inform EWU.

**Administrative Discussion 2.** *“...My HBCU experience was a breath of fresh air...I never had a Black male teacher except for a music teacher...those kinds of things you grow up*

*with never really knowing what you're missing until you get to the HBCU”-Dr. Jame’l R.*

Hodges.

In a discussion with Dr. Jame’l R. Hodges, the Vice President of Student Success and Engagement at Edward Waters University, the campus culture and student engagement were the central focus. Dr. Hodges shared that he was not a first-generation college student and similar to Dr. Campbell's parents, they did not complete college. He did, however, attend an HBCU in the south, Virginia State.

His positive fictive kin and othermothering experiences with campus professionals emerged almost immediately at the start of his collegiate experience. He was a part of a generation in the 1990s that was influenced by a prime-time show called *A Different World* that centered on students at a fictional HBCU. As a New Yorker, Dr. Hodges had only that show as an understanding of HBCU campus culture including Black Greek Organizations. At his alma mater, there were male and female professionals who mentored him in academics, social skills, and Greek life. Dr. Hodges stated:

Henry Dubose who was the director of financial aid...pushed me outside my comfort zone. [Then he was] promoted to VP of Enrollment Services and Student Affairs. [When] he retired, [he] recommended me to Virginia State, and that is how I became an AVP there.

Dr. Hodges maintained the relationships that were formed during his undergraduate years. Those relationships were key in supporting him in his student affairs career aspirations and the

programs that he works with his staff to create for students. His strategic programming expanded mentoring and leadership opportunities for EWU students.

When asked about the campus culture and their perspective on the current student experience at Edward Waters University, both administrators shared that they observed positive changes from the respective years they began their service. They each shared that the caliber of incoming and current students had improved significantly because those in and around the community could see the changes in the campus environment and programming. They both emphasized the importance of building and maintaining relationships with students so that their collegiate experiences would help them to build a community emerging towards excellence. They both indicated that findings from this instrumental case study would help EWU deepen its efforts to support student relationship development. In combination, these two EWU administrators provide an overview of the institutional context and their goals as academic leaders. Their insights point to the importance of investigating the role of relationships in the student experience at EWU and how those relationships may contribute to retention.

### **Participation Selection**

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) share, “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 96). Three students from Edward Waters University participated in two separate, individual interviews over (three months or 12 weeks). The students were purposefully sampled as defined by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) using the categories: a) international student (non-U.S. resident) b) out-of-state student and c) in-state (FL) student. The additional requirements for

students to participate in this study included having a connection or mentor-like relationship with a campus official, for example a coach or faculty member. The purpose of choosing students from different contexts was to explore relationships beginning with their selection of Edward Waters University, understanding the nature of the relationships developed, and understanding how those relationships influenced their student experience and retention. The student was also required to be a first-generation/first time-in-college student. The first-generation student can be defined as one who attends college for the first time and whose parents: a) have some post-secondary experience with no degree; b) no post-secondary experience but have earned a high school diploma or less as depicted by Hottinger and Rose (2006).

The first step in purposeful sampling was to develop and conduct an interest survey to solicit participants and share with one of my EWU thought partners, the Vice President of Student Affairs at Edward Waters University. The survey was then shared by his office with students who were identified by the TRIO Student Support Services Program (SSS) as first-generation/first-time college students. There are eight types of TRIO programs (Perna, 2015). Edward Waters University houses two:

TRIO Student Support Services Program (SSS) and Student Support Services STEM (SSS-STEM) are federally funded college retention and completion programs. These programs focus on academic, personal and career support for under-resourced undergraduate students. Nationally, TRIO SSS Programs provide opportunities for

academic development, assist students in meeting college requirements, and motivate students toward successful completion of their college degree. (*Trio*, 2020).

The students recruited had participated in the TRIO programs. According to Dr. A. Cummings, Director of the TRIO Student Support Services, the program serves 165 students annually. Dr. Cummings also shared the attrition rates of students in the program during the years that will be reviewed in this study:

2018-2019 – 137 which represents 83%

2019-2020 – 142 which represents 86%

2020-2021 – 148 which represents 89%

It is her position that the efforts the program made to remain connected to the students during university-sanctioned breaks such as winter and summer breaks and remote settings during the pandemic were key to the increase of students' choice to remain at the university and continue their education despite the rise in attrition rates.

The interest survey was created using Google Forms. The link was then disseminated to the entire population of first-generation/first time-in-college students at Edward Waters University. The multiple choice and short-answer survey asked demographic questions such as student classification, year of enrollment, and gender. Students were also asked to share if they were first-generation/first-time college students and whether they had campus a professional-student relationship. The survey provided the information that created a selection pool for the interview study.

The survey was sent out via email to the students one day prior to the start of the Thanksgiving holiday. As a faculty member where the students attend, this researcher was

afforded a unique perspective in that I understood student culture as it related to email-checking: it is limited. Given that understanding, receiving zero responses to the survey was not an unexpected outcome; an alternative plan was enacted. As a result, the initial plan for the interest survey was challenged by the holidays when students are not accustomed to email-checking. Therefore, a new plan included soliciting the assistance of administrative staff who had direct contact with students who fit the criteria. The administrative staff provided a list of students who were apt to engage and be communicative.

Ten students were contacted via email to complete the demographic survey. In an effort to look at a variety of student experiences, the student respondents were placed into four categories: a) international students (non-U.S. residents) b) out-of-state students and c) in-state (FL) students. Only one student per category will be interviewed. The purpose of choosing students from different contexts was to explore relationships beginning with their selection of Edward Waters University, understanding the nature of the relationships developed, and extending to how relationships influenced their student experience and retention.

Three of the students met the full criteria: first-generation and had mentor-like relationships with campus professionals. The survey's last question asked if the students were willing to participate in the study they would be contacted with a follow-up email. The three students were emailed a verification of their decision to participate in the study. That email included a link for the Google Form for the Informed Consent for each student. Once the Informed Consent was received from each student, then an email was sent to schedule a Zoom interview. Given that the winter break and final exams were pending, scheduling the first round of interviews was imperative. All participants were amenable to scheduling their interviews in



the small window prior to the winter break and after their individual final exams. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the three selected participants.

**Table 3.1**

**Participation Description**

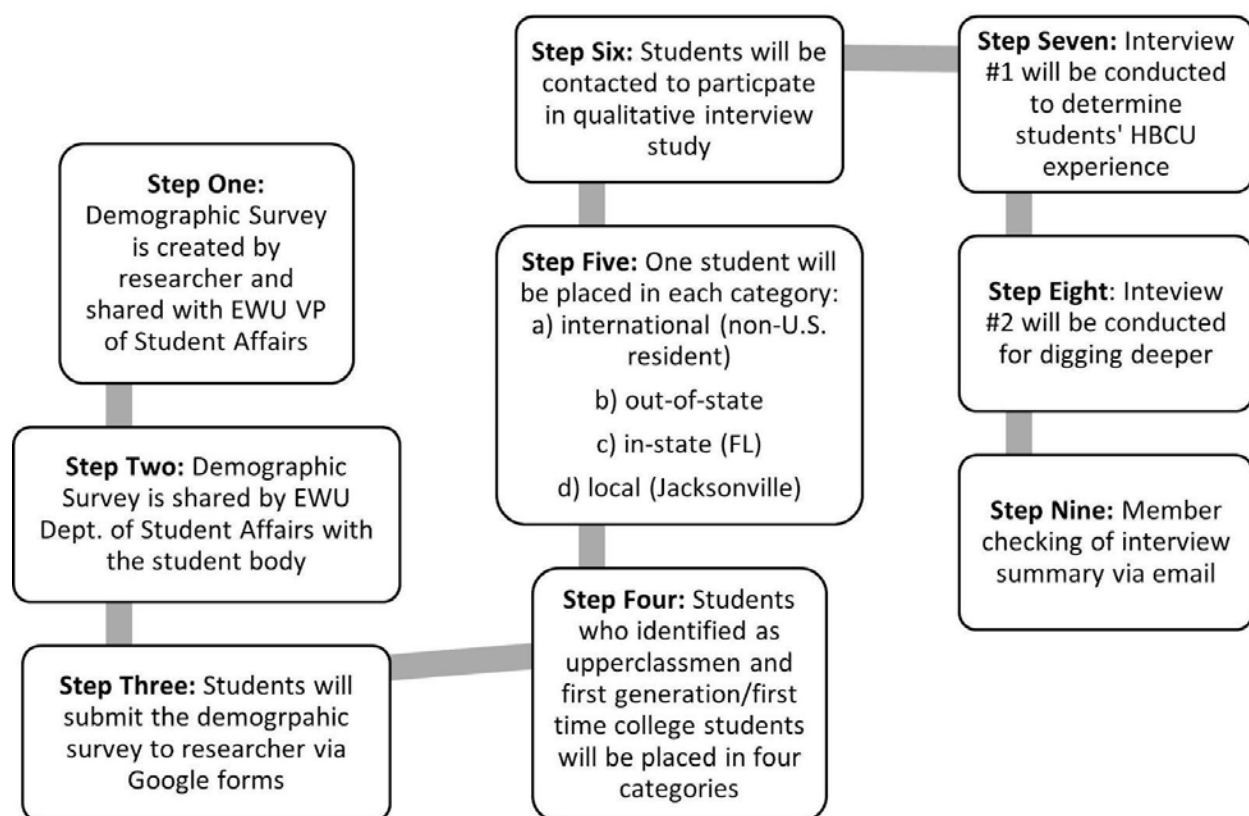
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Where were they from?</b>	<b>What semester they were in</b>	<b>FTIC</b>
John- Black male, international student, first generation scholar	Barbados	Sophomore	Yes
Walter-Black male, out-of-state student, first generation scholar	Wisconsin	2nd Semester Freshman	Yes
Julia-Black female, in-state student, first generation scholar	Tampa, Florida	1st Semester Senior	Yes

It must be noted that in the collegiate setting, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), prevents faculty from having any conversations with family members without signed documented consent from the student. The literature does not suggest that FERPA is set aside but inferred that the communication between the stakeholders adhere to the guidelines as set by FERPA (*Family educational rights and privacy act (FERPA)*, 2021). This information

was important to the study to ensure that all participants had several layers of protection while participating in a study inclusive of IRB protocols.

**Figure 3.1**

### Data Collection



**Step One:** Data collection began with a demographic interest survey. Student Affairs professionals were contacted to provide an introduction of the interview to potential student volunteers who fit the demographic profile.

**Step Two:** The survey was disseminated via electronic form. This survey asked participants to share information such as their academic status (classification) and GPA, major;

first year of enrollment; first-generation college attendee, and name of institution (this verified that the participant acknowledged that Edward Waters University was the institution of note).

**Step Three:** The final question on the survey requested student participation in the study and email for future communication.

**Step Four:** Given the lack of survey response, we adjusted the selection process by working with Student Services to identify participants that met the criteria. After identification of ten potential participants, students were selected and contacted via email to participate in the follow-up qualitative protocol (interview) to allow a rich description of their experiences.

**Step Five:** The three students were categorized as a) international (non-U.S. resident) b) out of state c) in-state (FL).

**Step Six:** To gain these insights, the interview methodology also outlined by Creswell (2009) was utilized. There were two interviews conducted which focused on the following three areas: (1) describing the HBCU student experience, (2) digging deeper into what was shared in interview one, and (3) lastly, follow-up conversation for member checking (Creswell, 2009). The interviews used an informal semi-structured approach with open-ended questions allowing for organic questions to occur and for adjustments to the interview protocol when participants already had answered a question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013).

**Step Seven:** There were ten questions in total; four with sub questions all within four categories of questions: prior to admissions, engagement opportunities, mentoring relationships, and retention exploration. The questions were designed to extrapolate the student experiences prior to and at college, relationships with campus professionals, and understand how those experiences influenced their decision to remain in college at Edward Waters University. The

interview protocol can be found in Appendix B. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour via Zoom to allow for easier methods of meeting in a safe, socially distanced setting, recording, and transcribing the interviews.

**Step Eight:** The second round of interviews included two components: deeper questioning and **Step Nine:** member-checking of emerging themes. The interview questions were organized into six sections, (campus relationships, trouble, retention related, family, member checking themes, and reflection) each with several sub-questions. These questions were developed based on the responses and analysis of the first round of interviews. This interview protocol can be found in Appendix B. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to an hour via Zoom to allow for easier methods of meeting in a safe, socially distanced setting, recording, and transcribing the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process followed Creswell's (2009) 8-step process as illustrated in Figure 3.2. The process required organizing and preparing the data which included notes and transcribing, reading through the data, writing detailed descriptions for each participant, coding to identify common themes, and finally interpreting the data results in the form of assertions (p. 184-189). The eight steps are described as follows:

**Step One: Raw Data (transcripts, field notes, images)-** For this study, the raw data included the recorded interviews with participants, the transcripts of the interviews, the researcher's journal, and other documentation (e.g., Tiger Tales Newsletter, social media) that directly related to participants' student experiences. During the interview, short notes were taken as reminders of topics to cover in the follow-up interviews with participants. Notes also reflected

responses that resonated with the researcher's experience, directly spoke to the components of the research questions: (1) How do first-generation/first-time college HBCU students enrolled between 2018 and 2022 describe their campus professional-student relationships? (2) How have the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention?

**Step Two: Organizing and Preparing Data for Analysis-** According to Creswell (2009) this process involves transcribing interviews, optically scanning materials, and typing field notes (p. 185). The interview audio recordings were sent to Rev.com for transcription. Upon receipt of the transcriptions, they were reviewed to ensure the entirety of the interviews were captured. The transcription was then stored in the designated Google Drive folder in the cloud.

**Step Three: Reading Through All Data-** The transcriptions/responses were read through to ensure clarity in the responses. A second reading of the responses allowed the researcher to begin to identify common ideas, shared experiences, words, or phrases within each individual interview response. The next step was to read through all of the interview responses to identify any common ideas, shared experiences, words, or phrases across the three interview responses. This process was designed to gain a "general sense of information and reflect on its overall meaning" (Creswell, 2009, p. 185).

**Step Four: Coding the Data-** Coding happened in three ways. First, a storyline was created to describe or illustrate each participant's experience. Second, the researcher coded for larger categories. Third, the researcher collapsed the larger categories into themes that responded to the research questions. These steps were completed first by analyzing each participant's data and then the researcher looked across the three participants to identify shared categories, themes, or points of differentiation. Creswell (2009) shares coding as the process of organizing

information into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information (p.186). The data was grouped by like-ideas, experiences, phrases, ideas, or terms. The analytical process in Step Four was iterative as the researcher worked fluidly through Steps Five through Seven with each step informing the other. Table 3.2 provides examples of the progression from story to theme, to assertion.

**Table 3.2**

**Examples of the three levels of analysis coding**

	Example Story Line-Description	Example Themes-	Example of Theme Integration and Assertion Construction
Example	The Scholar Athlete is an international student from Barbados and an athlete. He is a member of campus organizations including a fraternity and holds leadership positions in each. He also has a strong mentor who has helped to guide his decisions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● family</li> <li>● motivation</li> <li>● aspirations</li> <li>● relationships</li> <li>● leadership</li> <li>● trouble</li> </ul>	A meaningful campus professional-student relationship that supports retention includes behaviors that foster change, accountability, and connection.

**Step Five: Descriptions-** The description portion of the analytical work occurred first.

Descriptions involved a detailed rendering of the participant's narrative across the two interviews to capture the experiences, people, places, or events of the story (Creswell, 2009). The three

participant narratives provided insight into the lives of each participant and foreshadowed the emerging themes. These narratives illustrated many relationship building behaviors that occurred as a part of the retention stories. These behaviors were culled into Table 3.2 and presented in the findings.

**Step Six: Themes-** In this next analytical step, several large categories emerged from the reading, rereading and coding of the data which then resulted in more fine-tuned themes. The large categories that emerged were: a) family b) motivation c) relationships d) trouble e) why stay? f) other. In the Other category the following outliers were placed there: i) future, ii) HBCU, iii) institution-promise, iv) marketing/promotion, v) organizations, vi) events, vii) self-reflection, viii) institution-challenges, ix) school acceptance/choice, x) homesickness, xi) course delivery, xii) campus positions/leadership, and xiii) student programming. However, in further analysis of the categories, four conceptual themes emerged that appear in the major findings (Creswell, 2009). The themes: relationships, leadership, trouble, and aspirations are used as headings in Chapter Four of this study.

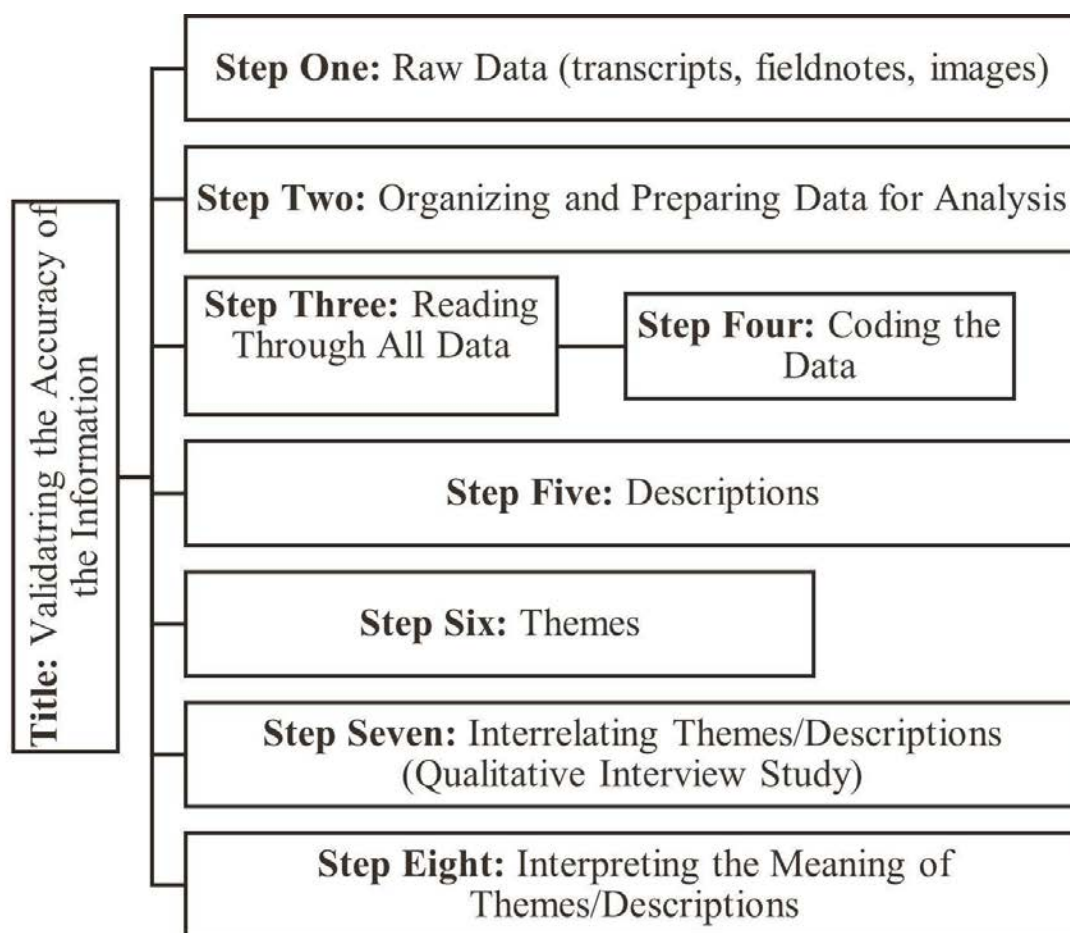
**Step Seven: Interrelating Themes/Descriptions** - In this step, the researcher returned to the themes to search for assertions that could be warranted by interrelating the themes. These three assertions, in combination with the participant descriptions and themes convey the findings of the analysis (Creswell, 2009).

**Step Eight: Interpreting the Meaning of Themes/Descriptions-** According to Creswell (2009) “interpretation in qualitative research can take many forms, be adapted for different types of designs, and be flexible to convey personal, research-based, and action meanings” (p. 190). This section answers the question posed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as shared by Creswell

(2009) “What were the lessons learned?” (p. 189) to make meaning of the findings. The assertions offer an interpretation of the personal, research-based, and action meanings conveyed in the participant experiences. The model below illustrates the data analysis steps.

**Figure 3.2**

**Data Analysis in Qualitative Research** (Creswell, 2009, p. 185)



### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

In order to ensure trustworthiness and credibility, the processes proposed by Creswell (2009) and Patton (2015) were utilized. These two texts clarify that the researcher must develop a consistent use of language for this research. For example, Creswell (2009) shares *qualitative*



*validity* defined as “researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures” and *qualitative reliability* as “researcher’s approach is consistent across different researchers...” (p. 190). I demonstrated validity and reliability by recording interviews and having the interviews transcribed electronically to ensure that all discussions were not from memory but with tangible documentation. *Triangulation* (Creswell, 2009) and *member checking* (Creswell, 2009) are other procedures that helped ensure the accuracy of the data analysis gathered in Figure 3.2. When the interviews were transcribed, they were uploaded to a Google drive and shared with the dissertation chair. The researcher conferred with the dissertation committee chair to determine if she reached the similar categories based on her reading of the data. This served as one method of triangulation of the data (Creswell, 2009). There were several tables which were completed to help determine commonalities and emerging themes by the researcher using responses from the participant interviews. The chair, in an external drive, shared her completed charts as a mechanism of triangulation (Creswell, 2009). In addition to triangulation with another researcher, member checking was built into the second interview. Participants were asked about the researcher’s analysis of the first interview in order to gain the participant’s reflection on the codes being formulated from the analysis.

Patton (2015) provided a direct method of evaluating this researcher’s bias and subjectivity continually through *reflexivity* for more “trustworthy interpretations” (p. 685). Patton (2015) further provided questions for the researcher to ensure reflective inquiry, coding, analysis, and reporting occur. To apply trustworthy interpretations, I annotated my thoughts in a journal as I conducted the coding and analysis and referred to it as I developed the summary; any

inconsistencies with formative and summative interpretations were resolved by returning to the direct transcript.

### **Ethical Transparency**

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) offered an ethical checklist (p. 264-265) utilized in trustworthiness and credibility and served as a guide for researcher positionality in that it included steps that were informative to both researcher and participants. The process mandated a clear tone of transparency:

1. Explain the purpose of the inquiry and methods to be used—this step is completed before and after the interviews.
2. Reciprocity (what is in it for the interviewee and issues of compensation) --this step is explained when the participants are contacted to participate in the study and reaffirmed at the start and end of the interviews.
3. Risk assessment—this should be covered in the invitation to participate; while there are no intentions on the researcher's part to cause harm, the participant must weigh any risk before agreeing to the interview.
4. Confidentiality—in as much as a study may be published, the expectation of confidentiality will plateau at not releasing their true identities; participants are identified by their category (i.e., In State Student ISS)
5. Informed consent—this step is completed in the email response to participate in the study.
6. Data access and ownership—this was explained to participants that all data belongs to the researcher.

7. Data collection boundaries—as the researcher, collection boundaries were followed as outlined in this study including information formerly agreed upon (i.e., interviews)

This checklist served as a reminder that as a researcher and as an educator there have been times when students have shared information that was sensitive and required me to take ethical and legal steps though the initial conversation did not begin with that tone.

This instrumental case study sought to better understand HBCU student experiences through their relationships. The researcher took great care to respect the relationship between the researcher and those being researched. deMarris and Lapan (2013) also added to the relationship between the researcher and the participant(s) in a qualitative interview study by sharing that researchers must remain vigilant and aware of the power dynamics inclusive of those who engage in a series of interviews that this study will conduct. The last point is the position of relationship-building between the researcher and the participants. The participants were provided with information before meeting one-on-one via Zoom.com. The question topics emailed to the participants before the interview to minimize any reluctance to answer questions and to build a sense of trustworthiness (Patton, 2015) and transparency of what will be asked of them.

### **Researcher Positionality**

The student experience was of great interest to the researcher because of positive undergraduate experiences including experiences with other students and engaging with the on-campus activities and programs. The undergraduate experience of the researcher was the direct influence on retention choice at her alma mater—which was similar to Edward Waters University in size, demographics, religious affiliation, and southern location. The researcher also shared

similarities with the study participants as first-generation/first-time in college, out-of-state students, and progeny of foreign-born parents who had never attended college.

The researcher's undergraduate experiences included: leadership positions such as a resident advisor in the women's residence hall which provided added financial and work experience for the researcher; joining campus groups such as the theater club and university choir which added social interactions with peers and coordinators; and positive interactions/relationships fostered with campus professionals who went above and beyond the scope of their positions by calling, knocking on doors, and having conversations with students wherever they may have encountered them outside of the prescribed settings (i.e. the classroom). The researcher was able to maintain communication with the relationships built with peers and mentors at her alma mater after graduation. They developed into friendships and/or viable academic and professional connections. The sustained relationships heavily influenced the researcher's support of the alma mater financially (alumni dues), through service (participating in mentoring activities for currently enrolled undergraduates), and recruitment efforts (participating in recruitment efforts sponsored by the institution).

Being an intentional change-maker at institutions where there are opportunities for students to engage with mentors in academics and social norms has been a goal of the researcher as an educator in the K-12 setting and the collegiate arena. In a professional capacity, the researcher has endeavored to support the EWU recruitment efforts, improving the student experience in the classroom and on campus so that they too may have a positive collegiate experience (Tinto, 2017), are retained, and ultimately graduate; continuing the positive behaviors and experiences garnered in the researcher's undergraduate tenure.

The campus culture at Edward Waters University is similar to the researcher's alma mater as shared in the Campus Culture section of this study. The researcher endeavored to provide an opportunity for HBCU students to have similar positive experiences from their built relationships that influenced them to stay in college and graduate. Through the added layer of constructivism with the framework of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013), and the interview method of gathering information from participants, a meaningful understanding of their experiences with their built relationships was of great interest to me and how I can better shape the experiences of future first generation/first time in college HBCU students.

As a graduate of an HBCU and current full-time faculty member of the HBCU under study, possible biases based on former and current experiences with campus professionals and programs at HBCUs are acknowledged. The researcher further identified with and acknowledged participating in the othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005)/fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) dynamic both as a student and a faculty member which created a passion for understanding the experience of othermothering and fictive kin relationships of students in this current generation with campus professionals (built relationships) and programs at EWU.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided a detailed plan of how this instrumental case study was conducted to understand the HBCU student experiences and the influence the experience had on their retention through the othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) framework. The process for an interview study followed the work of Creswell (2009) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) with supplemental guidance from deMarris and Lapan (2013) and

Patton (2015). After the final participants were selected, three interviews were conducted which included member checking taking place as the last interview. Analysis was a multi-step process. Lastly, to ensure credibility as a researcher, a journal was utilized to document the processes that occurred throughout the interviews, data collection, and analysis to ensure positionality did not frame findings with any unseen biases. Chapter four will detail the findings from the three participants' interviews by looking within each participant's story and looking across participants to generate themes as well as assertions that respond to the research questions.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Chapter Four shares the story of how three first-generation/first-time college HBCU participants described their campus professional-student relationships and how their experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention. First, I will introduce each participant by describing their background and entry to EWU and describe the evolution of their campus experience. Next, I will look across the three participants to share the common themes from my analysis representing their experiences as well as any critical differences that were illuminated from the analysis. Finally, I will identify interrelating themes in the form of assertions that describe their professional-student relationships and the experiences that influenced their retention.

### Narrative Descriptions

In order to introduce the participants, I structured their stories in a manner that would show progression and help the reader understand their development as individuals within an organization and community. To do this, I chose to use the “*I Come from a Place*” protocol. This protocol chronicles where they have been, where they’ve gone to, and where they still want to go using the stems: I come from a place..., I went to a place..., and I’m still going to a place... The progression structure encourages an introspective look at their beginning experiences geographically, physically, emotionally and how any and all these categories have evolved and ultimately where they desire to be at the end of their journey. The focus on progression or development also aligns with the core concepts guiding this study which is the development of fictive kin and othermothering relationships between campus professionals and the participants of this study that influence the campus experience and provide insight into student retention. The

decision to use the protocol as an organizational tool emerged when I read through their stories and observed that there was movement and progression in each of the narratives. The three participants featured are from within the state of Florida, Wisconsin, and Barbados.

## Stories

### Description #1: The Scholar Athlete

“I have a scholarship opportunity for you and if you come over you'll be on academic and athletic [scholarship] because you have good grades.”

*I Come from a Place.* John grew up in Barbados sure of who he was and where he wanted to be in life. He lived with his mother and two sisters in a modest home. He also had the love and support of his grandmother and aunts. John completed his secondary education by the time he was sixteen, which is decidedly earlier than his American counterparts, however on par with other international students. John enjoyed being popular in high school for being a scholar and as a star volleyball player. John's classmates and teammates started their lives after graduation following the path similar to John's: working, attending college, or traveling overseas for either. It was his dream to journey overseas to play volleyball. Unfortunately, a scholarship was not available at the time of his graduation. John pivoted, embracing his second love of cooking, and entered culinary school. Perhaps being a chef would be the pathway that would lead him overseas. However, delayed did not mean denied.

John had a volleyball coach who was more of a mentor—going above and beyond that of a coach. His former coach remained in contact with John after graduation. He wanted to keep the lines of communication open with someone he believed could compete at the collegiate level in the sport if given an opportunity. As fate would have it, in the middle of culinary school, his



then-former coach emailed him about an opportunity. That is how he found himself enrolled at Edward Waters University.

John's coach had already made the journey to America to be a coach in Boston. It was almost a year and a half later when he contacted John to share that he was ready for him to come to America. He shared that he was transitioning to take a position as the new volleyball coach at Edward Waters University. The institution was building its first-ever volleyball team and he wanted John to be a part of the inaugural team. John loved the sport but was even more excited to learn that his scholarship would be both athletic and scholastic.

***I Went to a Place.*** Though the weather in Jacksonville, Florida can remind one of Barbados in the summer months that is where the similarities end. It was a different environment and John's did not want to squander his opportunity by making bad decisions—to an extent. John's day consisted of classes, volleyball, home (the dorm), and unfortunately getting himself mixed with the wrong crowd. The decision to associate with the wrong crowd led to a semester of less-than-stellar grades. Unbeknownst to John, his mentor also had another person in mind who could aid in redirecting him to a more positive path. Enter Mr. Chrispin.

Mr. Chrispin had observed John as he tried to navigate the collegiate plane as he does with many students. John, however, was a little different. The volleyball coach and Mr. Chrispin were fraternity brothers. Mr. Chrispin stepped up to help guide John away from some of the negative choices he was making. John was placing himself in precarious situations; he was embarking on committing check fraud. He was so invested in the plan, he requested Mr. Chrispin to drive him to the bank. However, when they arrived, John was reluctant to get out of the car. He was experiencing a crisis of conscience. When Mr. Chrispin asked him what was wrong, the

long silence caused concern and John explained, “*Yeah, internationals can’t work in America. We get sent back home...I had to do what I had to do.*” John shared that Mr. Chrispin did not judge him but two things happened: they left the bank parking lot and Mr. Chrispin immediately took him under his wing.

Mr. Chrispin was the Tiger Nation advisor. Tiger Nation Campus Activities Board at Edward Waters University is the primary student organization on campus for events and activity planning for student life. Tiger Nation provides interactive and entertainment opportunities for students to explore while engaging in experiences to amplify our diverse and inclusive student population. Tiger Nation oversees large and small-scale programs such as Homecoming, Tiger Fest, Welcome Week, and more (*Ewu – Home 2023*).

Though Mr. Chrispin would gently push John to participate, John shared that Mr. Chrispin would say, “This is nothing that I want to force you to do, but I think you should do it.” John was observant as well of Mr. Chrispin. He watched as Mr. Chrispin engaged with other students and their comfort with him. John also felt comfortable and safe with him, after all he had kept his secret and continued to encourage him. They thereafter forged a connection beyond mentor-mentee. Students can elect to become members of Tiger Nation as John did or extend that role into leadership as he also eventually did. This engagement allowed him to interact with his fellow students and other staff members. He would participate in activities such as pep rallies, award ceremonies, and of course athletic games outside of volleyball.

John began to enjoy the teamwork within Tiger Nation and the opportunity to take on leadership roles that would allow him to do more for his student body with his ideas. Mr. Chrispin taught John how to tie a tie, a skill that many would expect a father to teach and that

was how John saw him. Mr. Chrispin was a combination of mentor, father, friend, and then brother. Another aspect of college life is joining a sorority or fraternity. John joined the same fraternity as his volleyball coach and Mr. Chrispin. John was influenced by the type of men and leaders that his mentors were. He wanted to be a part of an organization, a brotherhood that would have such men as members. John was expanding his collegiate experience. John shared a conversation with Mr. Chrispin:

If you want to be a Sigma, you could be a Sigma, but make sure you find your own reason for it. And with my coach and Mr. Crispin being such good influences on me and being a good word for example, I decided to join Phi Beta Sigma fraternity. Not because they told me to or not because they wanted it for me, but because that was the example of a Phi Beta Sigma man. John's grades returned to a scholastic level. He connected with peers who were more driven to engage in positive thinking and activities. He gained a bond with his new fraternity brothers. He became a school leader. John attributes his "180 degree" change to the built relationships with the campus professionals; his volleyball coach and Mr. Chrispin. He was also looking forward to ways that he could make a change.

***I'm Still Going to a Place.*** Mr. Chrispin mentored John in dressing for success and understanding the power of presentation in a business setting. He mentored John in the art of networking, and he was able to utilize those skills in meetings with the Vice President of Student Affairs and other Edward Waters administrators in positions to enact change for the student

body. John had relationships with other faculty members and staff, but none were as impactful as his volleyball coach and Mr. Chrispin. As John shared:

with the other relationships that I built; they were always just tunnel vision on the benefits that they could receive off of me. Which is they could say, oh, I helped him get into this class. So that was why he get good grades. They wasn't really just there for me. They was there for the attention they could get, you know what I mean? They taught me how to be a man inside of school and inside of work.

John's relationships with certain campus professionals would change in how he addressed them. They would no longer be Mr. or Dr. (insert any name), they would be auntie or uncle. John's classmates and teammates who were in the same fraternity, would now be called brothers. The familial turn in the progression of the relationships was due to what John termed, "I give you, you give me. A half and half type relationship." John shared that he "brackets" his relationships with school personnel based on the efforts he and the other person makes in the relationship. The relationships he has chosen to highlight are a major part of why he remained at Edward Waters University and has set goals for what he would like to see at his school.

When asked why he chose to remain at Edward Waters, John provided the following response:

The reason why I stay at Edward Waters right now is because I know how much I could do to change at Edward Waters, now that I'm in a better position. What can I do for the next person behind me? What can I do to help the person that is in the same situation that

I was in my first year? So that's the legitimate only reason for staying at EW, because there's really nothing else here that says you should stay here. If that makes sense?

John wants to find ways to impact and influence the collegiate experience for the future Tigers.

His first year was embattled because he was bored. The educational system of his homeland of Barbados in high school outpaced what would experience at Edward Waters his first year. According to John, the work was tedious and that led to skipping class and missing assignments. He wants his story to help other international students who may be struggling academically for varied reasons. He is concerned about the lack of translators for students whose primary language is not English recognizing the barriers they may be facing academically because of it and how that may impact the sports scholarship they received to attend the university. He wants programs to be in place to help international students and does not understand why a program isn't in place since international students have been attending Edward Waters since before he was born.

He endeavors to improve the HBCU experience for all students. He attended Edward Waters University sight unseen based on the relationship he had with his volleyball coach. His coach shared, according to John:

You came out here to play volleyball. You're representing your country in volleyball and academics. Why go back and be just like everybody else? Why not try and stay and fight to keep going?

John keeps this thought in his mind as he plans for more engaging activities and programs with Tiger Nation for his fellow classmates. With the relationship that has emerged between himself and Mr. Chrispin, John has someone who is willing to listen and encourage

when he feels depressed or melancholy; someone who expects big things from him and has taught him how to expect big things for himself.

John recently started an organization titled, International Student Association (ISA). His mission is to create pathways for international students to, “get jobs, social security numbers, housing...some of them can’t go or get back home because this is stuff that I struggled with when I was here my first year.” John overall would like all students to have mentors like his as he shared, “I’m too sure everybody need a Mr. Chrispin in their life or a coach. If they’re able to have that, I generally believe that this generation would do a whole 180 just like I did. You know what I mean?”

### **Description #2: The Preacher’s Kid**

*I Come from a Place.* Julia came from a mountain of obstacles that she worked to climb over. In her short years on earth, she had already felt the sting of a birth mother’s struggle with addiction. Not soon after, a family member raised Julia as her own and Julia had someone to call mom. Her early years were filled with enough growing pains that decisions made by her and for her ultimately caused her to start college at a later age, her mid-twenties.

Julia comes from St. Petersburg, Florida. She was raised by her aunt, who she calls mom, and her husband. Julia was encouraged from a young age to attend college but as she grew older she understood it to be her “only outlet to be successful.” It became more imperative as her family challenges and another “bad situation” caused her to relocate to Tampa. While in Tampa Julia found an AME house of worship to call her church home. The pastor there began to guide Julia as she worked to right her life. Julia began her higher education journey by attending community college first, but attending a university was her dream. Julia’s first choice for college

was the University of South Florida in Tampa but unfortunately her application was denied. Julia was frustrated and began to think that maybe her dream was too big. However, there was someone in her corner who was praying for her.

Julia's AME pastor observed the change in her over a month. He finally reached out to her and suggested she try applying to Edward Waters. Julia had never heard of the institution. She had never heard of the term HBCU and had no frame of reference for it but what she did know was that Edward Waters was an AME affiliated institution...that was enough to motivate her to apply.

The summer of 2020 began with heartbreak, in the middle there was hope. Julia's pastor took her to purchase the requisite needs for campus life and to outfit her dorm—Julia's family provided no financial or emotional support. Her church family provided her covering. Julia was excited to attend Edward Waters University. However, there was angst mixed in with her excitement as it was nearing August, and she did not know if her application was accepted or denied. She was told her application was lost in the system. She did not know if she should go. Her pastor had faith. He helped her pack her things and drove her to the Edward Waters campus.

***I Went to a Place.*** “So, my freshman year, it was pretty much a COVID year,” shared Julia. Julia expressed experiencing feelings of depression when she first arrived at Edward Waters, “...at the time I had never been that far away from home or what I needed to be familiar. I felt out of place, and it was just loud all the time. I wasn't used to that.” Attending college away from home can be lonely and a culture shock for some students. Julia was also having difficulty finding a sense of community because all events and courses were being delivered via a virtual platform. Julia initially enjoyed the courses and programs that were being offered through Zoom

but then it became mundane. However, the institution slowly moved programs and course delivery back to in-person options.

Julia enjoyed helping to develop and attend the programs provided by the school. College was starting to resemble what she had envisioned it to be, “We had talent shows...advocating events...highlighting suicide awareness, breast cancer, and silent headphone parties.” Julia, in her freshman year became a campus ambassador. She joined the Student Government Association (SGA), National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), and the Pre-Alumni Council. Julia was passionate about being a helpmate to her peers; she wanted everyone to have a great collegiate experience. She shared her reasoning:

I like helping people and so I wanted to be involved in some of the processes. I wanted to be involved in programming...I wanted to be a part of the experience and not just watching it. Julia credits her involvement in campus programs and leadership as her motivation to remain at Edward Waters. Though there were frustrating moments in her leadership roles, she kept her focus on why she was there—to help others and she felt reaffirmed working with people who felt the same way about service. Julia shares a few people who she credits with being a mentor to her: Professor Freeman and Professor Derban (both are faculty in her department); Ms. Tolliver (Resident Director), and Mr. Chrispin (Student Success and Engagement Coordinator).

Julia shared their willingness to go above and beyond their campus professional roles. “They’ve written letters for me for scholarships and provided campus housing during breaks when I didn’t necessarily have somewhere to go.” Julia’s relationship with the campus professionals was, in her words, “a two-way street. If I’m wrong, they’ll tell me I’m wrong. If I’m right, I’m right too.” Julia sometimes felt misunderstood by her peers because she was



experiencing her own insecurities in her head. She chose not to clear up the misunderstandings, instead choosing to let them run with their own thoughts. Her mentors worked to guide her to speak up and share her thoughts in a constructive manner, as a leader would. In her words, Julia shares, “It’s [the relationship] just being a safe space for a person so that person can come talk about stuff or about whatever’s stressing them out at school, and it be a non-judgmental zone.”

***I’m Still Going to a Place.*** Julia is a self-assured 4.0 scholar who wants so much more for her university and peers. When thinking about the future of Edward Waters and the experience that students would have, the first agenda item is resources. Julia shared that scholarships should be made available per department. She also wanted a more hands-on experience for students who were science majors and for those who take science courses that require labs.

I couldn't imagine being in biology and I do my lab on the computer. That's strange to me. But it's little stuff...it's like it's [the school] making progress and not necessarily the right areas. We'll have big enrollment numbers, but then our retention rates...so it's like we're getting people, but we're not keeping them.

Julia is utilizing her current position as SGA President to be at the table with administrators in order to be the voice of the student body.

One thing that's really big for me is seeing more scholarships created. So, I really want to help create a scholarship through SGA so that we can give it out to students. Because it's hard going to college and...I know financially school can be draining.

Julia is taking all of her experiences in life, in college, and with the guidance of her mentors to create better experiences for current and future students.

### **Description #3: The Southbound Scholar**

*I Come from a Place.* Walter comes from a state where the population of African Americans is 6.8% as of 2022 (*U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Wisconsin*). He always wanted to attend college and was encouraged to do so by many in his life. Walter comes from a single-family home. He and his mother enjoyed a moderate living. For most of his life, the schools that Walter attended, and his friends were predominantly white. And in Walter's own words, "I ain't never really had a good experience being around all Black people." So how did Walter find himself at a historically Black university so far away from home?

Walter switched schools in his senior year of high school and found himself at a predominantly Black high school. Walter had also lost his desire to go anywhere; he had abandoned his plan to attend a PWI or do anything. He was experiencing the melancholy that some seniors experience when nearing the end of their high school careers. At home, Walter's mother quit her job to pursue entrepreneurial aspirations the same year he would consider attending college. Financial help from his mother would not come. However, she was instrumental in helping him to complete any and all documents required for attending college. He knew from an early age that college would be his only path to achieving his goals in life. Family members and school counselors supported Walters's decision to attend college, but it was a fortuitous trip with a friend and her family that made Florida the location of whichever college he would attend. He had fallen for the Sunshine State.

"I did not want anything to do with an HBCU. I did know what an HBCU was," shared Walter. He shared the same sentiments with his school counselor. The only thing that he knew for sure was that he wanted to leave Wisconsin. She suggested that he consider applying to some

HBCUs and he agreed but only to the ones in Florida. The truth though was that Walter was still unsure about his future plans and changed his mind again. He thought he would simply stay home, attend a community college, and work.

His counselor pushed a little more and he applied to only one school in Florida, Edward Waters University. Walter had the encouragement of his counselors and his family, but it was Edward Waters University personnel that solidified his decision to attend.

I got accepted really quick and they just kept reaching out to me, kept reaching out to me, kept reaching out to me, made sure I went. I just met so many people from Edward Waters that just convinced me to continue going. Walter was on his way.

***I Went to a Place.*** I'd never heard of Edward Waters University a day in my life. But the one thing I loved about Edward Waters, it just seemed like it's really on the come up...they was getting all this money to fix up the schools...changing all types of stuff about it. I just really loved that about it. And then it was a new experience that I could try that I never tried before.

Walter described his excitement about his first experience with Edward Waters. However, the spirit of melancholy and doubt started to arise again. Walter shares: So, when I first came it was just so much drama happening with me, and it was just so much stuff going on. I was trying to leave a good four times, had my bags packed, I was texting my mom, I need a plane ticket home.

The effort that the institution was making toward engaging students and building up its campus made an impression on Walter. The institution erected a new football stadium, refurbished two of the residence halls, and began having more programs where the students could interact such as talent shows. He wanted to be a part of the exciting changes that were

happening. He was welcomed by the personnel and the students at the institution. Walter enjoyed the activities that were presented by the institution's campus activity board: Tiger Nation but longed for more.

After only two months in school, Walter decided to join Tiger Nation. It was also right before Homecoming, the annual celebration at HBCUs where current students, alumni, and all campus personnel gather to enjoy social and sporting events. Walter joined with many other students from his freshman class, students he had made connections with, and together Tiger Nation came alive for him.

Walter found a passion in engaging students. He shared his noticing, "they're still stuck in I feel like the EWU part and they're not realizing EWU is coming up. So, the students can start coming up, activities, they start coming up. Everybody needs to start coming up with the college, I mean with the university."

Walter shared that even though he joined Tiger Nation, he began to pull away from everyone and stopped talking. Walter felt isolated and could not find anyone he felt that he could trust—he began to find comfort in being alone. The first person who began to strengthen a bond with him was a classmate with whom he shared the distinction of also being an out-of-state student. Walter also shared that this time there were administrators who noticed. They began a more direct approach of engagement. They shared their perspective with Walter, "Do you not realize we see something in you, and we know you're going to do big things on this campus, you just have to really get involved." Walter was encouraged with such positivity that he eventually became a leader in Tiger Nation:

They are always trying to help you better yourself...it just really made me want to stay and it just really showed me that at EW I really have a lot of opportunities. I don't want to miss none of those opportunities. It just made me realize Tiger Nation is just a start of my EW experience and that I can go bigger and bigger with other stuff.

Walter credits student leaders in Tiger Nation and the Student Government Association (SGA) for encouraging and modeling the type of leader he wanted to be. As a freshman, he was partnered with an upper-class student who he remained close with. As a peer mentor, he was able to help him navigate college by doing mental check-ins and offering good advice.

Walter named two campus professionals who were integral in his mentorship, one staff member and the other was an upper-level administrator. Walter recalled a time when he was adamant about leaving school. Walter had visited Ms. Bolton's office when he first arrived at Edward Waters and had not returned since despite an open invitation. Walter believed that his "goodbye" visit to Ms. Bolton would end in a hug. Ms. Bolton promptly sat him down and gave what he deemed a great speech ending with, "You're an MVP, you have to play the game like you're the MVP." Walter was touched by the way she went above and beyond to reach him. Ms. Bolton shared a few personal stories related to perseverance. She shared her phone number and implored him to remain in touch via text if he were more comfortable and he could check on her as well. That motivated Walter to stay in school. Walter shared, "We really help each other because the reason why she got the job is to really help kids." She was the second person to influence Walter to stay in school.

The third person to pour into Walter's life was the Vice President of Student Affairs, Dr. Hodges. Walter shared, "It's been many situations where... I could've gotten in trouble and

kicked off of campus...a lot of administrators saved me...just sat me down and talked to me.”

Walter was appreciative of the grace they showed him. He offered, “They really believed in me. So, it just makes you really like the college way more.” It was Dr. Hodges who implemented tough love and a second chance. Walter shared a particular situation that was indeed grounds for suspension:

It was a situation where one of the friends I thought was my friends, brought me to her dorm. She ended up getting into a fight with her roommate and then her roommate’s boyfriend or fling fought her too and then pulled out a gun. I was supposed to get kicked out for that situation, actually. I was very stressed about that situation. But Dr. Hodges really talked to me, and he was just like, “You can’t put yourself in those situations anymore.” He saved me, talked to me and was like, “The reason we’re keeping you here is because I feel like you got something to prove to the school and that you’re really going to make a big difference at EWU.

Walter shared how irritated he was that Dr. Hodges would ask him daily if he were staying out of trouble. Walter decided he wanted Dr. Hodges to ask him different questions, so he began to study, improve his grades, and become more active on campus. It was important to Walter hear the question change to “Okay, I’m so proud of you” and to be asked how Tiger Nation was going. Walter wanted to change the perspective people had of him. He wanted to rebrand himself as a positive leader. That goal would lead him to think more critically about his role as a leader at Edward Waters University.

***I’m Still Going to a Place.*** Walter is looking forward to the growth potential of Edward Waters University. He shared that it would be a combination of students and select administrators who need to change their attitude about the school. He believes they are “stuck at

EWU level” and aren’t “taking it serious that they’re EWU.” Walter cites that his class touts the largest enrollment, and the school should “really work hard to keep it like that for every year.”

Walter believes that more funding should be invested in building new residence halls, upgrading current residence halls, strengthening the Wi-Fi, more caring faculty members, and improving the dining hall meal choices.

The place where he feels he can do the most is by supporting initiatives that create mentors for in-coming first-year students and by improving the on-campus activities for the student body. “It was moments at EW where I felt by myself and that’s not how you want to feel when you’re going somewhere different that your family’s not.” Walter is passionate about students reaching out and being open to receiving help. His experience thus far, “definitely feels like a family and that’s what definitely made EW easier to be at because you felt like you’re protected.”

Walter strives for the student body to have a positive, long-lasting impression of the HBCU experience. He believes with activities that promote bonding, self-confidence, mentoring, and a family-like atmosphere more students would stay and even more would attend. To that end, Walter founded his own dance organization and has several committed members. He has internalized the call to service and “Tiger Pride” that is espoused by his mentor and as the battle cry for Edward Waters University students. “Somebody definitely needs to tell them [students] this is your moment, and you can’t have anybody choose what you want to do for your moment. You have to make your moment yourself.” He believes that the family-like feeling helps students to stay.

## Narrative Summary

The narratives produced from the interviews with the three participants were illuminating. Their narratives shared perspectives from the students about college life not just as individuals but their connections with campus professionals and their peers that influenced their experience and likely their decision to stay at EWU. Their stories also each shared that despite their humble beginnings at EWU, they now desired to create a better environment or expand the landscape for current and future students at Edward Waters University.

## Themes

Table 4.1 provides a snapshot of the four themes that emerged from the data. This section illustrates the themes to provide insight into understanding how first-generation/first-time college HBCU students describe their campus professional-student relationship and how have the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention.

**Table 4.1 Theme Overview**

Theme	Definition of Theme	Example of Theme	Participants		
			1	2	3
Relationship	Two people who have intentional mutual investment and interest of remaining connected	Mentor-mentee relationship; coach-player	X	X	X
Leadership	Persons who possess desire, skill, and practice for leading others toward a strategic outcome	Positions in student government, royal court, and/or Greek organizations	X	X	X
Aspiration	A desire to achieve short- and long-term goals	running for office, applying for internships, planning	X	X	X



		for campus programs or institutional recruitment efforts			
Trouble	Unfavorable situations that hinder progress toward goals	Violations of student code of conduct met with rehabilitation methods	X	X	X

### Theme One: Relationships

In this study, the relationship theme referred to two people who have intentional mutual investment and interest in remaining connected. In all three narratives, the participants shared that they remained connected to a campus professional because the campus professional took an extra step out of their position to use a stern but encouraging voice to jar them out of making a bad decision. For example, John had the good fortune to have not just one but two invested mentors. John's high school volleyball coach remained connected to him and followed through on his promise to help him get to college. When his coach moved on to the collegiate level, he invited John to attend on scholarship removing any barriers for enrolling at Edward Waters University. Once John accepted, the coach introduced him to his second mentor who would change John's life when he was at a critical point in his life. John noted that these relationships were central to his success at EWU.

Walter was not seeking a relationship with anyone. He was resigned to being alone. Though he had a good relationship with a friend on campus, she did not have the tools to motivate him toward change. In Walter's narrative he shared that Ms. Bolton, his campus professional, saw him as an MVP. She sat him down and reminded him of his gifts, his

aspirations, and the expectations that she had of him. In that particular conversation, she was able to impart to him how important he was to her as well as how important his success in college was. She also shared that she would be there for him at any time when he was facing challenges, needed encouragement, or simply wanted to share good news. Their relationship characterized by accessibility and willingness to listen supported Walter remaining in school.

Julia also did not seek out a mentor, but she did take advantage of the opportunity when it arose. When she did not believe in herself and did not think she had the qualifications to apply for internships and scholarships, she was receptive to the mentorship of faculty members who spoke with and encouraged her. Her built relationships with her mentor provided important support. When moments of doubt reared, she looked to her mentor for motivation, solace if did not receive the reward, and celebration with them when she met her goals. The relationship facilitated her efforts as she wanted her mentor to be proud of her.

In this theme, relationships, the campus professional and the participants took a chance to trust each other. This leap of faith that the person who is talking and listening would be receptive to either was the first block in building the home that housed their othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) relationship. The concept of relationship, the activities or behaviors that sustain relationships, and the role of relationship in retention will be further unpacked in the assertions that follow.

## **Theme Two: Leadership**

Leadership refers to persons who possess desire, skill, and practice for leading others toward a strategic outcome. The participants' relationship with their campus professional was deepened, according to their narratives, as they observed the campus professional in their

leadership roles. For example, Julia knew from the beginning that being in service to others was one of her aspirations. She welcomed the guidance of her mentor Mr. Chrispin. He prepared her in the art and skill of public speaking, student engagement, and professional interactions with administrators especially in instances where there was a roadblock to one of her cabinet initiatives as Student Government Association President. He taught and exemplified taking the long view of strategic planning.

Although Julia had voiced an interest in leadership early, Walter was just learning to take chances related to leadership at the start of the first interview. However, in conducting the second interview, Walter had begun emerging into a leader. The relationship that was fostered between him and his campus professional led to conversations about leadership opportunities that blossomed into leadership. Walter credited these conversations as his foray into leadership. Eventually, he created his own campus organization for dance and began a campaign to run for a campus position. According to Walter, his confidence was bolstered because he had the support of Ms. Bolton and the example of leadership from his mentor Mr. Chrispin.

John chose to remain a general member of Tiger Nation, demonstrating his ability to support other leaders by participating and offering ideas. That strategy allowed him to exercise his leadership skills within his fraternity, serving as the 2nd Vice President of his chapter on EWU's campus. John's mentor is also a member of the fraternity and the campus advisor for the fraternity. John is in a position to grow in his organization with an advantage because of the relationship he has with his campus professional who is bonded to him by school and two different campus organizations.

In sum, each of the participants found themselves moving towards leadership positions. They were encouraged by their campus professionals. The relationship that had developed between them and their campus professional helped Julia, Walter, and John recognize the respect that the campus professional had regarding how they conducted themselves. They learned by watching how the campus professionals enforced institutional policies, enacted a healthy boundary of familiarity, and navigated their professional interaction with others when any kind of conflict arose. Those attributes were behaviors that each participant noted inspired their own interest in leadership.

### **Theme Three: Aspirations**

The theme of aspiration referred to the desire to achieve short- and long-term goals. In their endeavor for leadership, the participants sought and listened to the suggestions and guidance of their campus professional in their strategic planning. For example, Walter purposely chose to attend an HBCU in Florida and Edward Waters University was his sole choice. Yet when met with adversity he was determined to leave without a fight. His campus professional, Ms. Bolton, pulled him aside and spoke with him. She reminded him of the goals that he set for himself which caused him to reflect and revisit why he chose to attend EWU. Their continued conversations helped remind him of his aspirations and prioritize them. As a result, what was intended as his farewell became his goal setting session to reimagine his goals as a student leader.

Julia's aspirations were more explicit in her story. She shared that her main aspiration was to succeed in each of her academic responsibilities and leadership roles. She believed success in these areas was a necessary steppingstone toward stability and independence by the

time she graduates college. While it may sound like a general goal for most, for Julia she knew these aspirations would be life changing. Julia began her life with deficits in family support and financial support which made her think these aspirations initially seem out of reach. Those weights almost anchored her in Tampa at a place far below her goal. However, as she entered EWU, she aspired to be a full-time student at an HBCU and to achieve leadership status. With the support of her first mentor, the pastor, and Mr. Chrispin, she was able to do so.

John's aspirations focused on both him and his institution. John aspired to do more for his peers at Edward Waters University. One of the ways he has strategized to do more was to be in the leadership roles that afforded him the opportunity to be in the room where decisions were being made for particular programs that the students would enjoy. He became a member of the Greek Pan Hellenic so that he could provide ideas that would allow the Greeks on campus to be more visible and have more of a voice when representing Edward Waters University on and off campus.

Collectively, these aspirations were cultivated and supported by interaction with the campus professionals which led to new experiences as well as heightened commitment. Across the participant narratives, evidence exists that they were each successful in attaining and continuing to search for academic and leadership aspirations.

#### **Theme Four: Trouble**

Trouble in this study refers to unfavorable situations that hinder progress toward the student's goals. Williams et al. (2022) offer that students respond to approaches that are "humanizing and validating" (p. 11) in nature. In addition, Williams et al. (2022) posits, "Another aspect of culturally affirming responsiveness involved creating a humanizing

educational environment that prioritizes meaningful relationships” (p. 12). Across all three participants, trouble emerged as a threat to their success as a student. The trouble ranged from external family conflict to possible criminal activity. Julia’s trouble was more internal conflict that she experienced. For example, Julia started college at a community college without much family support and battles with her family forced her to move from one city to another alone. She struggled greatly until she met her first mentor, a pastor, who steered her away from internalizing her family’s perspective of who she was and focus on what she could accomplish instead. He helped her see that if she attended Edward Waters University, a small HBCU, and allowed herself to be receptive to another mentor she would develop the support she sought. She found that he was right as the institution and her mentor provided her with enough of a structured environment that when her internal troubles surfaced, there was someone there to help her work through it.

Walter's troubles stemmed from not knowing his self-worth, choosing the wrong friends, and being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Rowdy friends may have been exciting to him but the trouble that followed was less so. The campus professional who stepped in to help him navigate away from that particular crowd was just the push he needed to see things from a different perspective. Indeed, he was facing suspension from school but the conversation that was held with the campus professional, who ultimately gave him a second chance, also allowed him to seek a different college experience where he could turn his misadventure into a testimony and renewed purpose for success.

John’s initial problem was academic. Though his academic prowess was above average, he put forth no scholarly effort to maintain his grades resulting in trouble. His volleyball coach

and leadership mentor both stressed how important academic excellence was to his academic and athletic scholarship. They also shared that if he aspired to ever join a fraternity, in particularly theirs, his GPA could never be in question. This was a wakeup call to John. Having a mentor to intervene with this trouble was game changing. School was not a struggle for John, as he shared in his narrative, so it was well within his power to change his pattern of behavior and ensure that his grades were beyond reproach. Moving away from academic trouble to maintaining academic excellence would give him access to leadership roles. Therefore, it was in his best interest to enforce that change.

In sum, the participants were direct in sharing that their relationships with their campus professionals helped them work through troubles, helped them keep their eye on leadership opportunities, and maintain aspirations. The campus profession influenced the participants to choose a more favorable outcome which in turn led to their retention at Edward Waters University. These four themes, which were found across the three participants led to the development of the three assertions that are explored in the next section and offer insight into how first-generation/first-time college HBCU students describe their campus professional-student relationships and how have the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention,

### **Assertions**

Assertions are typically formed by bringing together themes to answer the research question. In this study, three assertions emerged: (1) A meaningful campus professional-student relationship that supports retention includes behaviors that foster change, accountability, and connection. (2) Leadership, call to service, and institutional pride are vehicles for supporting

student retention. (3) Working through trouble with a trusted mentor served as a vehicle for change that supported retention. The following section presents the assertion as well as examples of how the assertion was expressed in the lives of the EWU student experience.

**Table 4.2 Interrelating Themes to Create Assertions about Retention**

Assertions	Explanation	Participants		
		1	2	3
A meaningful campus professional-student <b>relationship</b> that supports retention includes behaviors that foster change through developing <b>aspirations</b> , accountability, and connection.	Campus professionals and students who have modeled how mutually beneficial it is to remain connected through various modes of communication and in-person engagement such private conversations	X	X	X
<b>Leadership</b> , call to service, and institutional pride are vehicles for supporting student retention.	Behaviors that demonstrate the benefits of leadership and opportunities to serve in leadership roles	X	X	X
Working through <b>trouble</b> with a trusted mentor served as a vehicle for change that supported retention.	Crossroad moments shared by the student where intervention on the part of the campus professional proved to be integral in the student's retention	X	X	X

**Assertion One: A meaningful campus professional-student relationship that supports retention includes behaviors that foster change through developing aspirations, accountability, and connection.** In the field of education, the campus professional-student



relationship has been characterized as reflective of the definition of fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffida, 2005). The participant narratives demonstrated these ideas of fictive kin and othermothering as a powerful influence of these relationships on the participants' college experience. Their relationships were not surface level, but rather deep, visceral, and responsive. The participants cite examples of influential behaviors that the campus professional demonstrated as a part of their relationships, giving us insight into the concepts of fictive kin and othermothering.

Table 4.3 presents a set of behaviors that emerged from within the study that illustrate and characterize what the campus professionals did to build these relationships and spaces where the participants felt support during their college experience. The behaviors that are presented in Tables 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 and were clustered into three categories: (1) behaviors that foster change (2) accountability, and (3) behaviors that foster connection (going above and beyond). Participants identified these behaviors as key to building their relationships.

**Table 4.3 Assertion One: Fostering Change**

<b>Assertion One:</b> A meaningful campus professional-student relationship that supports retention includes behaviors that <b>foster change</b> , accountability, and connection.				
Activity/Behavior	Description	Participant Examples		
<b>Behaviors that Foster Change</b>		1	2	3

Redirecting [D-Encouraging them to do hard things and make better choices]	Providing an opportunity to change one's behavior	"So, if they wasn't involved, I would probably have escalated the situation more" (John).		"It's been many situations where it's like, oh, I could of got in trouble and got kicked off of campus. But a lot of administrations saved me and just sat me down and talked to me and was like, "You know it's time for you to do it better." And they really believed in me. So it just makes you really like the college way more" (Walter).
Pushing [D-Encouraging them to do hard things and make better choices]	Repeatedly encouraging	So, I was at one bad term in my life in my second semester and this person came around, Mr. Crispin, and he really made me do a whole 180 on my life. He got me involved in Tiger Nation, even before I was a member... And that was when I really started to get joy for it. And he kept pushing me. He was like, "This is nothing that I want to force you to do, but I think you should do it" (John).		
Teaching [N-Taught social skills]	Providing instruction or education	"Mr. Crispin was just right there, always just talking		"One time I was wearing pajamas, he gave me a lesson on not wearing pajamas in public 'cause I have a

and professional networking]		to me and showing me the ropes and telling me what to do, what not to do, and really shaped me into a better man” (John).		platform or presence and stuff like that. So yeah, it depends on stuff” (Walter).
An influence [F-Shares their own life and life lessons	Modeling a behavior into action	“...he then adopted me as one of his mentees” (John).	“I would just say definitely my network group. And I became more comfortable even with some of my professors and advisors. Then I was just comfortable explaining either my story or what I'm going through. Sometimes I used to just internalize a lot of stuff and just expect people to read my mind” (Julia).	
Modeling [L- Mentor Characterized by a strong level of respect and trust]	Showing how		“...sometimes it's not always necessarily what a person does. It's sometimes just being a safe space for a person” (Julia).	

Guiding [N-Taught social skills and professional networking]	Provides instruction	“He teaching me that I have to start wearing ties. I got to start dressing business professional on certain, business casual on the next, because it's always a image, you are your own image is what he taught me in my first year and my second year” (John).		“But then certain administrations just started talking to me and they was really like, do you not realize we see something in you and we know you're going to do big things on this campus, you just have to really just get involved” (Walter).
Suggesting [I-Honest/Direct feedback that demonstrates care]	Ideas		“He's just always there, supportive. Like I said, when I'm wrong, he get on me just like your mom or your pops will. But at the same time in the same breath still very got my back. If I'm wrong, I'm wrong. But if I'm right, I'm right. And he's going to defend that just as hard” (Julia).	
Believing (in) [M-Mentor]	Showed faith or support in		“It don't matter if everybody else around you doing	

believing in the student]			subpar or not, it's like they hold you to a standard" (Julia).	
Direct approach/en gagement [N-Taught social skills and professional networking]	Similar to engagement		"And usually it's a two-way street. If I'm wrong, they'll tell me I'm wrong. If I'm right, I'm right too" (Julia).	

**Table 4.4 Assertion One: Accountability**

<b>Assertion One:</b> A meaningful campus professional-student relationship that supports retention includes behaviors that foster change, <b>accountability</b> , and connection.				
Activity/Behavior	Description	Participant Examples		
<b>Behaviors that Foster Accountability</b>		1	2	3
Stepping up [B- Providing emotional support]	Taking responsibility	"Mr. Crispin being my pop since my second year and my first... My second term and my first year, that was when he adopted me as a son. So he basically took on the role that no other person at		"And I was supposed to kicked back to school for that, but he saved me and he was even a chief officer, they talked to me and they was like, "The reason we're keeping you here is because I feel like you got

		<p>this school has taken on. He even been doing stuff better than my parents type joint. He just been there for me when nobody else was. So that was where I took a keen, I'm going to humble myself son role to Mr. Crispin, and it always been mentor, mentee, father and son, you know what I mean?" (John).</p>		<p>something to prove to the school and that you're really going to make a big difference at EWU" (Walter).</p>
<p>Expectations [A-Goal setting &amp; Keeping dream alive]</p>	<p>Targeted aspirations</p>	<p>"My coach just said, "You came out here to play volleyball. You're representing your country in volleyball and academics. Why go back and be just like everybody else that try to come to America and didn't succeed? Why not try and stay and</p>		

		fight to keep going?" (John).		
Asking questions [I-Honest/Direct feedback that demonstrates care]	Inquired about various situations		“They not going to let you fail. They not going to let you quit. And sometimes they're harder on you than anybody else because they know what you're capable of. And once people know what you're capable of they going to hold you to that” (Julia).	

**Table 4.5 Assertion One: Connection**

<b>Assertion One:</b> A meaningful campus professional-student relationship that supports retention includes behaviors that foster change, accountability, and <b>connection</b> .		
Activity/Behavior	Description	Participant Examples

Behaviors that Foster Connection		1	2	3
Being available, Contact [K- Feeling like they are always available/access to them]	engage another via email, phone, or in person		“I want to say it's mutual. I needed some guidance, but I didn't necessarily know who to go to. But the people who did gravitate towards me, it's because they could see that I wanted the guidance. And I was seeking it, although I didn't quite have the answer about who I needed to go to” (Julia).	“When I first came, he was introducing me to everybody and he introduced me to Ms. Bolton. Ms. Bolton was always like, "Come to my office. Come to my office." I just never did until I got so depressed I was just in my room. Then one day when I was fixing to leave, I just went into her office and she just gave me the big speech” (Walter).
Talking [B- Providing emotional support]	Sharing one's thoughts or perspective with another	“So, he introduced me to stuff that I wouldn't do before, so he introduced me to Pageant.	“But as I got more comfortable, I was able to just have open conversations and just explain	



		<p>He introduced me to Sigma.</p> <p>He introduced me to. He introduced me to a lot of different little things that caught my interest, and it only caught my interest because we both had similar interests”</p> <p>(John).</p>	<p>certain stuff”</p> <p>(Julia).</p>	
<p>Forging a connection [F-Shares their own life and life lessons]</p>	<p>Intentionally engaging with another person</p>	<p>“With Mr. Crispin and with my coach, it was always, I give you, you give me. A half and half type relationship. And that would be</p>		

		anytime, anywhere. It didn't have to always be school, it didn't have to always be personal” (John).		
Giving [E-Helping to provide basic needs]	An act of sharing			
Providing basic needs (housing) [E-Helping to provide basic needs]	Provides shelter	“Mr. Matthews, in my first year, he didn't even want me in Yellows. I was supposed to stay in the Cones, but now in my sophomore year, I in the Yellows, and I call him about an issue, I get it		

		fixed, just because of the relationship I had built with him” (John).		
Facilitating entry and access-Written Letters [A-Keeping goals alive]	Providing letters of recommendation for other opportunities		“Whenever I've needed recommendation letters for scholarships or internships, whenever I've gone to my teachers, especially the ones in the comm department, they've always been willing to write me something or to recommend me to somebody else or something” (Julia).	

Listening [J- Listening in a non-judgmental way]	The act of intentionally providing attention	“He would talk to me every time I get a depressed day and tell me that I'm going to be okay. He got my back. And he would even show it to me in terms of being there for me, like I said earlier” (John).	“Just little simple stuff. Let me come in the office and vent. I know you got a million and one things going on, but you still taking a chance to listening and hearing what I got to say” (Julia).	
Encouraging [B- Providing emotional support]	Provides support	“And for...people that rarely know me, only recently know me to come and expect bigger things for myself that I didn't expect for myself, just really	“Everybody don't handle stuff the same, but it's also important, the people you have in your corner, they don't change and they stay the same. And they continue to be, and they continue to	“They don't have to be there for like they choose to be there for you. Y'all don't have the same last name. Y'all got no blood. They choose to be there for you because y'all bond is there and they make you want to grow and keep going on” (Walter).

		make me want to push, because these are the people that really know” (John).	uplift. So, it's very important. And I'm glad I have a support system in my life” (Julia).	
Feeling safe/ protected [B- Providing emotional support]	Provided a space and feeling of comfort		“I was trying to do something and I fell up short. But these people that are in my life, they wouldn't let me stop. They wouldn't let me quit no matter how much of a funk I was in. And I think that was very important because they wouldn't allow me to feel how I felt or they wouldn't allow me to do some of the things that I	“It made me really see myself. It really showed me that, "Oh okay, I got this. I'm doubting myself." She was definitely the reason I'm still here, that I was still here 'cause I was ready to leave that day” (Walter).

			thought I wanted to do at the time” (Julia).	
Welcoming [H- Inviting them into the community/making a personal connection/reaching out; Helping to make things feel familiar]	Providing comfort of entry	“My mentors, what is called it, they saw me, and they was like, "I like what I see." So they was like, "I want to be your mentor and help you become a better person" (John).	“I like helping people and so I wanted to be involved in some of the processes. I wanted to be involved in programming. I wanted to be involved in helping the students here because I feel like I wanted to help make our experience. I wanted to be a part of the experience and not just watching it” (Julia).	“Mr. Chrispin, he knows everything about this campus if you need an event done. I asked him for advice. He gave me advice on the events, what I should do, how I do this, how I do that, so that was really good” (Walter).
Noticing/Observing [B- Noticing & Checking in]	Watching over a period of time		“Benefits, they watch out for you. If they see	“Ms. Bolton. She influenced me to stay. I still go to her. She

			opportunities that they think you would be good for, they'll send them to you, they support you” (Julia).	has me check up with her at least once a week and she usually give me like motivational speeches. She just tells me that I'm doing good. She just helps me keep my drive going” (Walter).
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Category 1: *Behaviors that fostered change* included actions that required the participants to make decisions that shifted their perspective or movements. *“So, in my first year I was not a part of any of these organizations, but I did tell myself I want to make a change in how I attend EW and my experience here at EW. So that's why I really pushed to join these other organizations and such.”* Those behaviors included listening to campus professionals who offered suggestions that influenced positive outcomes such as redirecting them from withdrawing from school or being mandated to leave the institution.

Category 2: *Behaviors that fostered accountability* included providing examples and opportunities for students to take responsibility for their actions and create a plan for improvement or change. *“But then certain administrations just started talking to me and they was really like, do you not realize we see something in you, and we know you're going to do big things on this campus, you just have to really just get involved.”* Those behaviors were exemplified through inquiry, goal setting, and reviewing if expectations were met.

Category 3: *Behaviors that fostered connection* included the intentional continued engagement between the campus professionals and the participants. “...when I was ready to go, she's actually an assistant to our VP of Student Affairs at Edward Waters. She literally sat me down. I sat there when I first came to college, and I never went back into her office. And then the one time I went back to her office I was going to leave, she sat me down and she gave me a great speech and she was just saying, ‘You're [an] MVP, you have to play the game like you're the MVP’.” Those behaviors were demonstrated through listening in a non-judgmental way, providing spaces (locations) where their conversations would allow for discretion, and sharing personal stories with one another.

The assertion of *a meaningful campus professional-student relationship that supports retention includes behaviors that foster change, accountability, and connection* has been demonstrated in the narratives that the participants have shared. In their own words, they have defined three sets of behaviors comprising a variety of relational activities that their campus professionals engaged in that they believe supported their retention.

**Assertions Two: Leadership, call to service, and institutional pride are vehicles for supporting student retention.** The old adage states, “many are called but the chosen are few” when referencing leaders. Then there are scholars who have written scores of texts classifying the various types of leadership styles from Stephen Covey (2006) to Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2012) and the types of people who follow those leaders. The participants of this study initially were not looking for leadership experience nor any leader in particular. Their process of becoming leaders began with observing campus professionals who demonstrated actions that the participants deemed worthy of following and emulating at Edward Waters University. As illustrated in Table



4.4, the second assertion that emerged in this study was *leadership, call to service, and institutional pride are vehicles for supporting student retention*.

**Table 4.6. Assertion Two**

Assertion Two: Leadership, call to service, and institutional pride are vehicles for supporting student retention.		
Activity/Behavior	Description	Example from Narratives
Leadership as a vehicle for retention [feeling involved; being a part of a team]	-running for office -joining campus organizations (dance team, athletic team, pep team, Greek letter org, academic organization–honor society)	“See it through. That's what they used to tell me. You can see it through. You start, you could as well just finish” (John). “With that, it taught me lessons. It taught me how to be a leader more, how to comfort people, how to be strict, but nice at the same time. It taught me dedication. It taught me responsibility, heavy on responsibility. That's the biggest lesson I learned with having my own dance org is responsibility” (Walter).

<p>Service and helping others as a vehicle for retention [making things better]</p>	<p>-social action (voter's registration drive, food drives, campus improvement rallies, physical and mental health initiatives)</p>	<p>"If you realize that somebody else not doing it, to get up and do it yourself. Because what you going through right now is what somebody else going to go through. And if you don't want it for yourself, you shouldn't want it for the next person. So, you should do something to change it" (Julia).</p> <p>"Once I got in[to] leadership, it was easy because it was, like I said, I like to help people. So, it gave me another purpose" (Julia).</p>
<p>EWU Pride as a vehicle for retention</p>	<p>-the goal or endeavor of strategically planning programs and events of changing the outside and campus perspective of EWU as an institution</p>	<p>"The reason why I stay at Edward Waters right now is because I know how much I could do to change at Edward Waters, now that I'm in a better position" (John).</p>

	<p>and/or building on the progress that is being made for the purpose of school pride in retention and recruitment</p>	<p>“Tiger Nation doing bigger things, the different Greek organizations trying to do bigger things” (Walter).</p> <p>“They [EWU] need more staff that's student first or school first and not self-first. So, then they'll actually be invested into the students, because students can feel like when people don't really care” (John).</p> <p>“The one thing I loved about Edward Waters, it just seemed like it's really on the come up. I was saying they was getting all this money for schools to fix up the schools. I was saying that they was fixing up the school, changing all types of stuff about</p>
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		it. I just really loved that about it” (Walter).
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Leadership as a vehicle for retention related to the participants feeling involved and being a part of a team. Each participant’s first foray into leadership began with purposely joining the campus organization, Tiger Nation. The organization focuses on engaging students through programming and events that anchor them to the university and to others who hold them accountable. Being in the organization provided them with tools and skills to build their own leadership techniques. It provided the opportunity to observe campus professionals and upper-class students in leadership roles in which they would like to serve. Because they were trained with their peers through workshops that offered connection, conflict-resolution, and engagement, they were prepared to take on leadership roles when they became available. One participant said,

With that, it taught me lessons. It taught me how to be a leader more, how to comfort people, how to be strict, but nice at the same time. It taught me dedication. It taught me responsibility, heavy on responsibility.

They patterned themselves after the campus professional who guided and mentored them which ignited the intrinsic small spark that emerged as a strong desire to be a servant leader.

A special form of leadership was also key to the retention story and that is service. Service and helping others as a vehicle for retention was a way of making things better. The participants each shared in their narratives the desire to help others:

If you realize that somebody else [is] not doing it...get up and do it yourself. Because what you [are] going through right now is what somebody else [is] going to go through.

And if you don't want it for yourself, you shouldn't want it for the next person. So, you should do something to change it.

Multiple participants also shared one of the motivating points for staying at Edward Waters University was to make things better for the current student body and those who would attend in the future:

...they [EWU] need more staff that's student first or school first and not self-first. So, then they'll actually be invested into the students, because students can feel like when people don't really care.

The participants worked in these leadership roles in an effort to affect change in others the way they have experienced it themselves. Leadership gave them an expanded reach to help others.

Finally, EWU Pride was also identified as a vehicle for retention. When asked why he chose to attend Edward Waters University, participant #3, Walter, shared:

...the one thing I loved about Edward Waters, it just seemed like it's really on the come up...they was getting all this money for schools to fix up the schools... changing all types of stuff about it. I just really loved that about it.

Across the participant responses, achieving the leadership role was a point of pride for themselves. They believed that they were making a difference as leaders at Edward Waters University. Their leadership and passion for leadership and EWU was exemplified in their social media posts, their continued membership, activity, and recruitment of new and transfer students into Tiger Nation, resulting in their dedication to persisting toward graduation.

Table 4.4. speaks of the importance of having multiple ways to encourage leadership. The participants joined organizations for a sense of belonging and community. In addition, in the case

of Walter, he created his own dance group when he saw the opportunity to fill a gap. John is developing an organization for the growing international student population, again filling a gap, and Julia has the opportunity to continue her initiatives as the second term SGA president. These leadership pathways were made possible because of the trust and safety they felt with their campus professionals, the built relationship fostered their confidence in their own power to impact EWU, as well as the choice to remain at Edward Waters University.

**Assertion Three: Working through trouble with a trusted mentor served as a vehicle for change that supported retention.** College is an adjustment for students across the board. It's made even more strenuous when the decisions they make lead them into situations that threaten their enrollment in college. The participants of this study each found themselves in situations that resulted in a theme labeled trouble. Trouble also is a category that demonstrated the actions of the campus professional that helped the participants through their struggles and thereby emerged as the third and final assertion: Working through trouble with a trusted mentor served as a vehicle for change that supported retention. As illustrated in Table 4.5, the third assertion emphasized two ideas, the *process of working through* and the *process of rebranding*.

**Table 4.7 Assertion Three**

Assertion Three: Working through trouble with a trusted mentor served as a vehicle for change that supported retention.		
Activity/Behavior	Description	Example from Narratives
Process of working through	-conversations between the campus professional and participant that led to	"My relationship with Mr. Chrispin is like that. He will be the angel in my ear, or Ms. Abby

	<p>a plan for change and retention.</p>	<p>will be the angel in my ear telling me, "This is what you need to do to get where you want to be." You know what I mean? And "This is what you need to do to stay out of trouble" (John).</p> <p>"I really got to use a recent situation. I was trying to do something and I fell up short. But these people that are in my life, they wouldn't let me stop. They wouldn't let me quit no matter how much of a funk I was in. And I think that was very important because they wouldn't allow me to feel how I felt or they wouldn't allow me to do some of the things that I thought I wanted to do at the time" (Julia).</p> <p>"I spoke to Dr. Hodges and he was like, "No, I'm going to talk to him." He was like, "You could get in trouble for this. You just have to learn from your lesson." He gave me another opportunity" (Walter).</p>
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Wanted rebranding.	-the participants' desire to change how others see them and how they see themselves by first doing the work of changing behaviors that will result in the contrary	<p>“Just showing my family I did the college stuff, was the first to do it, showed y'all y'all can do it, siblings following in the footsteps, just showing life can get better, and you don't have to choose to have a bad life. You can eat it. You could eat your life up around your life” (John).</p> <p>“So, you got to remember the reason why, for real, for real. That's going to keep you anchored, and it won't let you float away or become a different person. Or it won't change you because you literally going to remember” (Julia).</p> <p>“Wherever that success is, whether as a chef, whether it's systems analysis, whether in America, whether in Barbados. I'm going to make sure that my I'm in the right path. I'm not in jail, I'm not dead. And I'm making my money” (John).</p>
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The Process of working through was a key part of responding to trouble. The participants in this study credit the connection they had with their campus professional as the reason that they



were able to work through their troubles to remain in school. For example, although Walter did not cause his trouble, he was a witness to the violation of the school code of conduct. The action that he took, recording the crime in progress, he genuinely believed was the proper avenue to protect himself from the assailant and the repercussions from the school. By sharing, unpacking, and reasoning through the situation with his campus professional, Walter was able to work the issue out so that he would understand how law enforcement would have perceived the situation. The campus professional, was also the person in the position to send him home, was key to Walter's ability to learn from the situation:

"I spoke to Dr. Hodges, and he was like, "No, I'm going to talk to him." He was like, "You could get in trouble for this. You just have to learn from your lesson." He gave me another opportunity" (Walter).

The professional chose to listen to the participant and the recording. Taking the extra step to investigate and again listen changed the outcome of Walter's future.

Similarly, John was literally in the midst of attempting to commit fraud and would have unknowingly involved his mentor. John shared the recollection of the day he shared with his mentor and how working through that trouble helped him change his path:

We can't work on campus either, so we don't be making the money, so I had to do what I had to do. And then that's when he took me under his wing, and he introduced me to Black Males. He introduced me to getting a student leader role on campus and stuff like that. And then that's how I do a whole 180 in my life.

Because of their deep relationship, John was compelled to share what he was about to do, and that action strengthened their bond.

Equally important to working through was the participants wanting the opportunity to rebrand themselves rather than be recognized for their trouble. By sharing their experiences with their mentor and working through their troubles, the participants grew into the persons that their campus professionals saw in them. Not only did working through trouble help them remain in school, the process of working through and staying out of trouble led them to see themselves differently. John explained that his rebranding was focused on seeing himself on the right path, “Wherever that success is...I'm going to make sure that I'm in the right path. I'm not in jail, I'm not dead. And I'm making my money.” Similarly, Julia noted that rebranding or changing was a part of who she was and how she could live her life, “...remember your why...don't let something that didn't go your way change who are...it gave me another purpose.” Finally, Walter explained that the interactions with his mentor led to paying attention to who he was and could become and then make important personal changes. He explained, “the process of working through trouble with my mentor really made me see myself” and the ability to choose who he would become. The participants shared detailed responses in their narratives that illustrated they wanted to be seen as change agents for themselves and others. This was a common aspiration for them all. This growth would eventually be how they came to see themselves. Participants strived to rebrand themselves and the act of working through the trouble itself became a conduit for retention.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, a combination of stories, themes, and assertions illustrate how first-generation/first-time college HBCU students describe their campus professional-student relationships and how the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships

influenced their retention. The relationships fostered between the campus professionals and the participants were supported by four themes: relationships, leadership, aspirations, and trouble, which in combination led to the three assertions that suggest how student retention was influenced by these campus professionals. In response to these findings, Chapter Five will present a summary of findings, limitations, implication for practice, and suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

This study addressed an important problem of practice experienced at Edward Waters University, student retention. As indicated by EWU campus administrators, attrition rates of students during the years prior to this study were: 2018-2019 – 137 which represents 83%, 2019-2020 – 142 which represents 86%, and 2020-2021 – 148 which represents 89%. The disappointing retention rates signaled the researcher to engage in exploratory conversations with leadership at the institution regarding how they might learn to better support students in their student experience. In these conversations, the administrators both emphasized the importance of EWU professionals and faculty becoming more attentive to and involved with their students. By understanding the problem better, EWU could enhance the collegiate experience and help build a community focused on retention and excellence. Both administrators indicated that findings from this instrumental case study would help EWU deepen its efforts to support student relationship development. These insights pointed to the importance of this study focused on investigating the role of relationships in the student experience at EWU and how those relationships may contribute to retention.

This qualitative instrumental case study responded to the research questions: (1) How do first-generation/first-time college HBCU students enrolled between 2018 and 2022 describe their campus professional-student relationships? and (2) How have the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention? The participants of the study included three EWU students represented by an international student (non-U.S. resident), out-of-state student, and an in-state Florida student. Chapter Five includes a summary of findings, limitations of findings, implications and recommendations for practice and recommendations for

future research which can benefit Edward Waters University and other institutions with similar problems of practice.

In responding to these research questions, Chapter Four began with the use of the following protocol: *I come from a place, I went to a place, I'm still going to a place*. This protocol was used to illustrate the individual progression of the participants' collegiate experience as well as where their road converged with the campus professional who became more than a mentor to them. The protocol resulted in stories that included emotional, geographical, and philosophical perspectives which were the participants' thoughts about who they were as a person before college and who they understood themselves to be at the time of the interviews as exemplified in all three narratives. Each narrative demonstrated how participants underwent a meaningful change with the guidance of their mentor and how that change influenced their decision to remain enrolled and active in school. As John shared "...that's how I do a whole 180 in my life."

The findings of this study also included four themes that were central to each participant's story. These themes included a) aspirations b) leadership c) trouble and d) relationships. Aspirations included goals that participants had for themselves behaviorally, within the institution, and careerwise. Leadership spoke to the active roles that the participants strived to attain as an act of service. Trouble described a variety of situations that caused the participants to have to make a hard choice that would impact whether they were able to remain in school or not. Leadership described the opportunities the participants were both able to observe and able to emulate because of their interactions with their campus professionals. Finally, aspirations also

became a theme as participants described leadership, academic, and career goals as central to their success. These themes were illustrated in the narratives and combined to create assertions.

Finally, the study presents three important assertions that emerged from the participants' experiences that offer insight into what supported their retention. These assertions include:

Assertion One: A meaningful campus professional-student relationship that supports retention includes behaviors that foster change, accountability, and connection.

Assertion Two: Leadership, call to service, and institutional pride are vehicles for supporting student retention.

Assertion Three: Working through trouble with a trusted mentor served as a vehicle for change that supported retention.

The assertions paint a picture of the experiences that the participants had at Edward Waters University. Their college experiences have been visibly influenced by the relationships they had with their campus professionals. These assertions help the reader understand how these three participants experienced EWU and what elements fostered their story of retention. Given that qualitative research is not meant to be generalizable, the onus of the responsibility will be on the reader to determine the degree to which these findings are applicable to other situations and experiences.

## **Discussion**

The participants in this study were first-generation/first-time college students. The institution they attend is a small, private, A.M.E. affiliated HBCU. The small population of the institution was a benefit to the students as they were able to be seen by their campus professionals more easily than they would have been at an institution that boasts several

thousand students, and it was easier to find a mentor to connect with. Tym et al. (2004) shared that FTIC students whose parents did not attend college have difficulty once they are enrolled in college in comparison to those students whose parents attended college citing retention as one of their challenges.

In this study, the participants' expectations, fears, and goals were present at the start of their collegiate journey. However, with the guidance of their campus professionals and the relationship they forged together, their experiences became enriched, and the stories, themes, and assertions allowed the examination of one aspect of the HBCU culture, a special type of relationships, which might influence retention. As a result, the focus became understanding and unpacking the built relationships between campus professionals and students and the participants' perceptions of how those relationships played in the participants' retention. As shared in Chapter Two, the framework of fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffrida) are concepts that describe how participants in a relationship approach the relationship. Evidence from Nelson and Guiffrida suggests that the fictive kin perspective from the student (Nelson, 2013) and the othermothering perspective from the campus professional (Guiffrida, 2005) can offer a unique approach to mentoring and student support. Additionally, Bernard et. al (2012) asserted that the positive outcomes of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) emerge only through authentic engagement between the mentor and the student when they both chose to build the relationship.

Fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) were enacted when the participants (students) engage with their campus professionals in such a manner that they perceive the campus professionals as more than their role as educator, coach, or administrator, they view them as family. Nelson (2013)

described *Intentional Kin* as relations that emerge from choice and intention (daily life) (p. 266). In the narratives, the participants described their campus professional relationships with specific terms such as brother, uncle, mom or auntie—phrases often aligned with those who are in biolegal families. Nelson (2013) described *Organizational Kin* as relations that emerge in voluntary organizations (fraternities; sororities). The participants of this study all joined at least one campus organization, Tiger Nation, which strengthened their ties to their peers, their campus professional (mentor), and to their institution. One of the participants also joined the same fraternity as his mentor which provided another environment where he was able to call his mentor brother.

Othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) is the parallel to fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) as a pairing to the conceptual framework of this study and as the descriptor that aligns with the intention of the campus professional who engages with their mentee on a college campus. Guiffrida (2005) shared that interview studies yielded [student] responses such as “student-centered” and “going above and beyond” when describing relationships with faculty and academic advisors (p.707-708). Othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) describes the campus professional’s engagement with their mentees as purposeful and beyond the scope of their role as an educator or administrator. The campus professional is invested in accepting the responsibility of “mothering” or guiding the student without the expectation of reciprocity.

Although this study utilized the conceptual framework of fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) and othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) as lenses for understanding and exploring the students’ experiences, the concepts of fictive kin and othermothering could benefit by being operationalized. The concepts of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013)



were primarily associated with the relationships students have with faculty specifically as the campus professional as they are the ones who have the most contact hours with students. Given that dynamic, it makes the application of the concepts more unique with Student Affairs professionals because there are no mandated contact hours with specific students at specific times, which is the case with scheduled faculty and the courses they teach. It demonstrates the targeted intention of the campus professional and student to remain in contact with each other to expand their relationship. It also demonstrates that the concepts of othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) are not relegated to roles or positions but to people.

This study deepens our understanding of these concepts by describing what those concepts looked like in action. The findings of Assertion One, *A meaningful campus professional-student relationship that supports retention includes behaviors that foster change, accountability, and connection*, moves beyond the existing research to offer those interested in improving retention a set of behaviors or practices that can be used to support students. Palmer et al. (2010) shares similar themes in their research such as “Challenges and Contributions to Participants’ Success” (p. 91) where they cobbled the student experience with both or either categories. The behaviors shared here were grouped within three overarching categories including behaviors that support change, behaviors that support accountability, and behaviors that support connection. This triad of behaviors are like those observed within a strong, positive parent-child relationship. Although there is no biolegal connection between those who engage in othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013), the behaviors are so similar that

those who participate experience outcomes that were often positive enough to influence retention.

In sum, these relationships were intentionally built between campus professionals and participants of this study. The framework helped to explore the components of the relationship between the two parties and identify how campus professionals influenced the participants' collegiate experiences and retention. The behaviors resulted in participants feeling seen, loved, heard, understood, accepted, challenged to aspire, and safe. In all cases, these were experiences that reminded them of family and home and/or their definition of family and home.

In addition to more deeply understanding the types of relationships that participants described as important and illustrating fictive kin and othermothering, this study also sought to gain deeper insight into retention as the main goal of this study. Each of the participants were packed and ready to leave school for their own reasons. Almost all the campus professionals who stopped them from leaving were from the department of Student Affairs. Tinto (2017) posits that student experiences are important to retention and all the participants credit their campus professional for enhancing their student experiences and for being the reason they chose to stay at Edward Waters University either through guidance or providing a second chance.

The research literature offers some insight into the retention literature and much of the literature focuses on pre-college experiences. For example, Engle et. al. (2006) found that acceptance to college was easier than retention but that pre-college programs aided in their preparation for college academically and socially. Unfortunately, none of the participants of this study had the benefit of such programs before college. However, evidence from this study demonstrates that some of the programs at Edward Waters University such as TRIO and

organizations such as Tiger Nation eventually supported these first generation/first time-in-college students. The key was the role of the campus-professional in linking the student to these opportunities and organizations.

The nature of the tools used to support retention in this study aligned and extended Zepke and Leach's (2010) research which offers three perspectives for retaining students rooted in student engagement. These three perspectives included motivation and agency, transactional engagement, and institutional support as key to student retention. Motivation and agency recognized that engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise agency (Zepke and Leach, 2010, p. 169). In this study, the participants shared in their own words that they were motivated and encouraged when they faced bouts of depression, self-doubt, and challenges with persisting in college. They internalized the interactions and words that their campus professionals imparted during those times of struggles and recalled them when needed. For example, John was faced with his demons of choosing criminal activity—an easy way to fund his needs in college or choosing to trust in his mentor by asking for help when he divulged what his intention was instead of waiting until the deed was done which invariably would risk his academic future and freedom.

Transactional engagement refers to when students and teachers engage with each other (Zepke and Leach, 2010, p. 169) often resulting in retention. Julia understood the nature of the relationships with her campus professionals from the onset; when she decided to remain in college she comprehended that she would need to emulate leaders who could guide her in her current and future endeavors. The art of networking and engaging her peers was demonstrated by

her run and election for a second term as SGA president. Her aspirations for leadership were to ensure that her peers would benefit from the plans she had to grow them all.

Finally, research has also noted institutional support as central to retention as institutions provide an environment conducive to learning (Zepke & Leach, 2010, p. 169). In this study, Walter benefitted from the institution's campus organization, Tiger Nation. It was through this program that his campus professionals were able to provide workshops that helped him to understand the purpose of how his success in life began by improving his academic standing so that he would be in a position to affect change for himself and others. He was allowed the space to learn from his mistakes (Williams et al., 2022) and rise to become the best version of himself because he chose to stay.

Although this study aligns with Zepke and Leach's typology, this study extends their work by once again illustrating how the campus professional supports students in these areas. Assertions two and three of this study are often presented as interdependent in the narratives. Assertion two states, *leadership, call to service, and institutional pride are vehicles for supporting student retention* and Assertion three states, *working through trouble with a trusted mentor served as a vehicle for change that supported retention*. Both assertions point to vehicles that support retention and it can be clearly understood that students were afforded an environment of institutional support to feel safe to work through their troubles and learn (Zepke and Leach, 2010) from their troubles. Then their pathway/aspirations for service and leadership could be attained. The pride that they have in achieving their goals and in their institution motivated choices to remain connected to their campus professionals for guidance. The interplay

between the various assertions and the associated behaviors or actions creates cyclical action and on-going support.

Zepke and Leach (2010) shared, *institutional support, transactional engagement and motivation and agency* are important to an institution's retention goals. The assertions add to the literature by expanding their research highlighting behaviors which were conducive to retention. This study provides information from students about specific behaviors that were enacted by individuals who were not mandated in a specific mentoring program but felt called to intercede on the behalf of the participants in this study by listening and encouraging, for example. Fledgling and/or challenged mentoring programs could benefit from this study as a resource for citing targeted behaviors or required traits of mentors during professional development. It can also be used as motivation for students who may be reluctant to seek out or accept mentors because they have no frame of reference of what that relationship can develop into. They may also be more apt to participate if they understand that the participants did not come from a place as ready-made leaders. They had to be guided through their own challenges to emerge on the other side and it happened because they chose to stay.

### **Limitations of Findings**

Limitations of the study findings exist in at least two important ways. First, missing from the stories is input from campus professionals and, second, the participants are all students who were retained, and their student experience reflects one particular location and population. First, input from campus professionals was limited and only one side of the relationship was investigated. When looking at the study perspectives were included from the Vice President of Student Affairs and the now Dean of Academic Affairs/Associate Provost. Their support of the

study offered credibility that there was a problem of practice on the campus of Edward Waters University. However, the campus professionals with whom the participants built a relationship were not interviewed. Although the campus professionals' perspective of the built relationships with the participants may have added value to the study, there has already been research that gained the mentor's perspective. Bernard et. al (2012) offered that there were challenges with othermothering (Guiffida, 2005) where the participants in their study offered honest accounts of their interactions with campus professionals. However, the participants had concerns about creating a false narrative for others about the expectation of repeated behavior of the campus professionals across all settings. Mawhinney (2012) also echoed Hirt et. al (2008):

The cultural norm of othermothering also creates an environment where students accept this type of relationship as an expectation and not the exception...those who aspire to teach in HBCUs need to establish a personal and nurturing relationship with students.

This continued connectedness with students often prevents faculty from becoming numb to their students' circumstances (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002) ...the missing element of this equation is the emotional toll on faculty. (p. 223)

This and the offering from Bernard et. al (2012) created a place of inquiry that could have been explored in interviews with campus professionals. This study sought to focus solely on the participants' perspective to increase that cannon of research.

Second, the study was limited to the location, population, and participants. The location, population, and participants of this study was focused on only one institution, Edward Waters University. It was purposely structured this way because the problem of practice was there. It was the goal of the researcher to first examine the problem of practice at that location, with that

population, and direct inquiry with specific participants. The findings that emerged from the study will be used to improve or expand policies, programs, and practices at Edward Waters University. Although these themes and assertions are reflective of the broader literature offering some credibility, the onus of the responsibility for determining the utility of the findings in other contexts will be on the reader.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

Implications and recommendations from this study should influence practice at Edward Waters University. This can begin by having conversations about the findings of this study and how the findings might influence current policies, programs, and practices. For example, what kinds of faculty and staff professional development might need to be put into place to help create meaningful campus professional-student relationship that supports retention includes behaviors that foster change, accountability, and connection. How might the institution put safeguards in place that support student's personal growth along with academic growth. If leadership is key to retention, how might the EWU expand leadership opportunities and build student leadership skills? What might be the different pathways to leadership available to formal leadership as well as service and the development of institutional pride if these are vehicles for supporting student retention. Similarly, working through trouble with a trusted mentor is key to retention where are the spaces for students to turn if they face trouble. How can these be strengthened? These assertions can be the nucleus of implementing new or expanding policies and programs at EWU.

The policies and programs that Edward Waters University has housed under Student Affairs can incorporate the CAS Standards, (the standards and competencies that guide Student Affairs departments), in their policies. Using the assertions of this study, a program which

intentionally targets first-generation/first time college students with their experiences in college as the anchor for building the program can be developed. In terms of practice, the institution already has TRIO, Black Male Explorers, and Tiger Nation as organizations that focus on student engagement and retention. However, the recommendation based on the review of literature and the full analysis of the study, is that programs and workshops can be developed to demonstrate *how* the relationships are built and/or strengthened between the campus professionals and students. When there is effective programming aligned with strategic planning and anchored in common values, basic principles, and beliefs it makes for an efficient office of Student Affairs as shared by Ludeman and Strange (2009). Especially programs that target leadership and its many styles—which the students shared as a need and a want in their narratives. Noting again that Guiffrida (2005) and Nelson (2013) developed othermothering and fictive kin, respectively, as concepts when researching faculty behaviors, the concept of intentionally engaging with students and students with any campus professional is still applicable. Incorporating the assertions presented in this study into programs can also add value to the institution in retention and recruitment efforts. It could be a unique aspect of the college experience for the students and the campus professionals that began at Edward Waters University.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

When thinking about recommendations for future research, several additional questions emerge related to understanding retention at HBCUs. For example, how do students describe their student experience at larger HBCUs and how does that experience relate to retention? Similarly, what does student experience and retention look like at gendered HBCUs? What does student experience and retention look like at other MSI? Would the findings be similar when



exploring the student experience and retention in high schools? Future research could include how do the assertions and themes hold up across these varying contexts.

Additionally, using the findings of this study, campus programs might be intentionally designed to develop and strengthen campus professional abilities to develop professional relationships with students that would support retention. Research on these kinds of programs might help us understand what the impact would be of intentionally providing learning opportunities that develop these themes and how having a mentor with this training during the initial years of college might lessen the probability of students vacillating between staying or going. Strayhorn (2007) presented in their research several theoretical models used to evaluate student academic and social integration including those of Tinto (1993) and Tierney (2000) that have been recently critiqued. Strayhorn (2007) offers that more research is required, in that analysis of first generation/first time in college experiences are complex; they share in their findings, “future studies might include multiple items to operationalize academic and social integration (Strage, 1999)”. Research might also explore how the findings of this study play out for students of other races and cultures as well as students who are not first-gen/FTIC.

In addition to research questions, the lenses of othermothering and fictive kin might be further explored. Future research could benefit by expanding the use of the othermothering (Guiffrida, 2005) and fictive kin (Nelson, 2013) lens as a conceptual framework. How might these lenses help develop the family-like structures of HBCUs at PWIs to support student retention, persistence, and success (graduation) to advance student experience (Tinto, 2017). This research is essential if we are to support African Americans and other minorities at any institution with particular support needed for first-generation/FTIC students who experiences

challenges associated with a larger environment and being far from home. More research on mentoring programs that support relationship building, leadership development, aspiration setting and achievement, as well as navigating trouble would benefit the student experience.

### **Chapter Summary**

This study began with the researcher's determination to understand why and how students are connected to campus professionals whom they, for all purposes, have just met. What are the behaviors that they demonstrate that draw and compel students to listen to their advice, accept their guidance, and feel safe enough to share their fears? What behaviors are modeled by the campus professional that influence the students to remain in school and complete college when other students or campus professionals may have missed the opportunity. As a result, the important voices and experiences of three EWU students offered insight into how EWU might improve retention. The results confirmed the importance of relationship development in the retention experience returning us to the title of this dissertation- *Homecoming: Examining Built Relationships that Influence HBCU Student Experiences*.

This exploration is akin to the researcher's own experiences as she reexamined her collegiate experiences and what influenced her choice to remain in and complete college. How did the researcher remain connected to her alma mater long after graduation? To answer that question, one need only look at homecoming. Homecoming was an annual event where family, defined as current and former students, could reconnect with each other and other campus professionals (family) at their alma mater (home). Homecoming occurs at almost every HBCU,

large or small, and is considered a type of family reunion offering an opportunity to reconnect with family.

The homecoming in the title metaphorically refers to a time, place, and venture where one has overarching positive experiences of interacting with others that they consider family similar to a family reunion. The engagement with these family members during homecoming lies in the choice of being with other people who have influenced their lives in such a way that they completed college, made life-changing decisions, made career/leadership advances for example and they were able to do so because someone cared enough to ensure that they were successful. This is the kind of support one would expect from strong relationships. In this case, the participants and their campus professionals developed relationships that felt like family and Edward Waters University became a home. These relationships created the homecoming that supported their retention.

Typically, scholars talk about the importance of building relationships. However, this dissertation focuses on the concept and nature of “Built Relationships” rather than “building relationships.” This distinction emphasizes that positive relationships were intentionally built between the student and the campus professional. This study spoke with students who were connected with campus professionals who had made a dynamic impact on their lives academically and socially. Although the campus professional had reached out, they built these relationships together, each bringing their best intentions to create trust, a sense of safety, and a familial bond recognizing that the relationship would continue to grow long after either of them have transitioned to other endeavors. These built relationships created a home and influenced

their retention at Edward Waters University bringing this study to an ouroboros close:

*Homecoming: Examining Built Relationships that Influence HBCU Student Experiences.*

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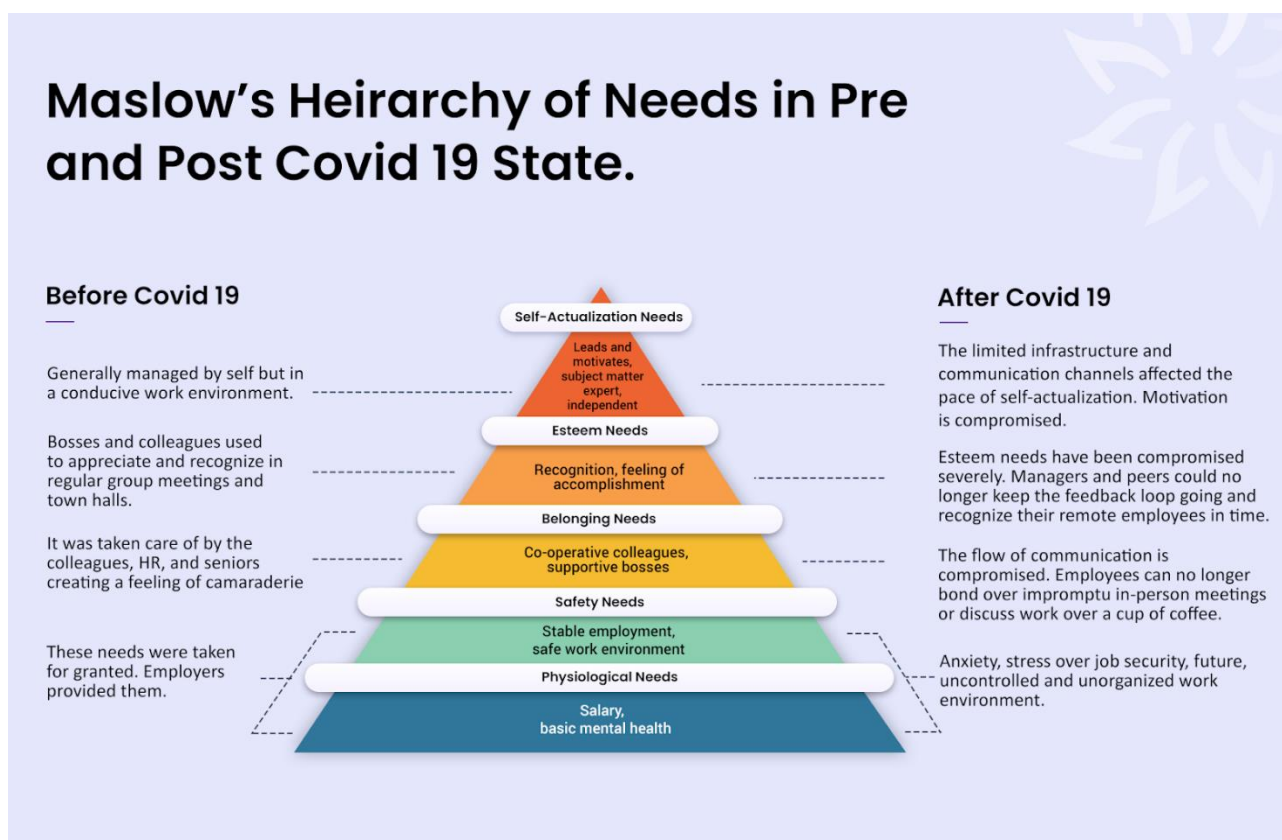
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## APPENDIX A

### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs depicted below provides Maslow's levels of needs for humans. In addition, the chart provides information about how a work environment conducted itself before COVID 19 and after. This information is included in this study to provide context related to external forces that may have impacted the connectedness of relationships between campus professionals and college students due to remote settings.



**Figure A1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs in pre- and post-COVID 19 state.**



## **APPENDIX B**

### **Instrumental Case Study Data Collection Protocol**

#### **Section A- Overview of the Instrumental Case Study**

**Purpose Statement:** In this instrumental case study, campus professional-student relationships will be explored to better understand the first-generation/first-time college student's experience and how these relationships may influence their retention.

**Research Questions:** (1) How do first-generation/first-time college HBCU students enrolled between 2018 and 2022 describe their campus professional-student relationships? (2) How have the experiences within the campus professional-student relationships influenced their retention?

#### **Section B- Data Collection Procedures**

- Week of October 31, 2022- communicate selection for participation with the four selected participants and schedule three 1-hour individual interviews to take place in the conference room in the James Weldon Johnson Bldg. on the campus of EWU for student convenience or via Zoom conferencing platform—student choice.
- I will conduct three one-on-one interviews with each principal in a four-week period and will analyze data after each series of interviews. (Dates may vary by a week or two depending on the participants' schedules and the fall break scheduled to begin November 21. However, all interviews will conclude on December 2, 2022).
- Data collection for four cases will take place over the course of four weeks

- Obtain informed consent from the four participants
- Schedule three interview dates with each participant within a one-week period
- The four participants will be interviewed over the course of 7-10 days per interview phase

First one-hour interview session with participants will be conducted Nov. 1 – 11, 2022

Second one-hour interview session with participants will be conducted Nov. 13 – 20, 2022

Third one-hour interview session with participants will be conducted Nov. 27 – Dec. 2, 2022

#### Section C- Email verbiage

Thank you for your participation in this instrumental case about your experiences with campus professional-student relationships. I would like to schedule three 1-hour interviews with you over the next three weeks. Please click the embedded Doodle poll link: [Interview Schedule](#) and select all the available times for each interview timeframe.

Here are topics we will discuss during each interview:

- Interview 1- Describing your influence (s) to attend college
- Interview 2- Digging deeper to determine if or how campus-professional relationships influence you to remain in college
- Interview 3- Reflection of your responses to determine if there is more you would like to add or change and the circumstances that led you to add or change

All interviews will take place in the conference room in the James Weldon Johnson Bldg. on the campus of EWU for student convenience or via Zoom conferencing platform— student choice. You have the option of having your camera off and utilizing a pseudonym for anonymity. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns. Looking forward to meeting with you.

#### Section D- Rescheduling procedures:

If a participant needs to reschedule an interview, if possible, it will be rescheduled within the first 15 days of the case study. However, if this is not possible, reschedule for the closest available date to the initial two-week period.

## **B2. Dissertation Interview Questions**

### **Prior to Admission**

1. Why did you decide to attend a university?
  - a. Who supported and encouraged you to attend?
  - b. What barriers or facilitators did you experience getting to college?
2. Tell me about how you decided to attend EWU.
  - a. Describe the circumstances which led you to attend Edward Waters University.
  - b. What role did attending an HBCU play in your college choice?
  - c. Were there any barriers or facilitators related to getting to EWU?

### **Engagement Opportunities**

3. Describe your experience as a first-time/first-generation college student.
  - a. Share your experiences with campus events and/or programs.
  - b. Describe their role in your decision to remain at Edward Waters University.
  - c. Describe any leadership and/or organizational ties you have on campus.

### **Mentoring Relationships**

4. What relationships are important to you at EWU?
5. Share an experience or story related to anyone who supported your engagement at EWU.
6. How would you describe your relationships between yourself and any of the campus professionals?
7. How did they support your involvement in organizational choices and leadership opportunities?

### **Retention Exploration**

8. As you near completion of your degree, what has helped you finish this education journey?
  - a. Share any factors which influence you to remain at Edward Waters University.
  - b. Share any circumstances which caused you to consider pausing your collegiate journey; what factors motivated you to change your mind?
9. Share any experiences at Edward Waters University that you would describe as the reason(s) that inspired you to remain and that could possibly be a reason for future students.

10. What could EWU do to help more students complete their degrees?

### **B3. Interview #2 Protocol**

#### **Section 1: Campus Relationships-**

- You mentioned in your first interview that your campus professional influenced your ability to stay at EW. Are there other relationships that we didn't talk about before that have influenced your retention?
- Which relationships have been the strongest in influencing your staying? And why?
- Did you seek out mentors or do you feel you were sought out? Why?
- What specifically do you believe that your campus professional did that helped you? Any examples?
- Thinking about your freshman year to now, how do you think your campus relationships evolved or changed and why?
- What are some benefits or drawbacks to having these close campus relationships?

#### **Section 2: Trouble-**

- You shared in your interview that you "got into something" or into "trouble." Tell me some more about how your campus professional was integral in helping you out of the situation? What do you think would have happened without that person's involvement?
- What did you learn from that person and experience that you would share with others to help them?

**Section 3: Retention Related-**

- You shared in your interview thoughts of leaving the institution initially. Please share the circumstances surrounding that decision.
- How would you describe the challenges that made you think about leaving?
- What factors stopped you from withdrawing from school?
- Based on your experience, why do you think your peers or friends have decided to drop out of school? What don't they have or what is missing in their lives that may have led them to dropping out? How are you different from them?
- What activities are you involved in at EWU that have been influential to you staying? Did these activities change over time? Why? How?
- What motivates you *now* to stay in school? Has that motivation changed or remained the same over time?

**Section 4: Family-**

- How would you describe the campus relationships that are important to you?
- In our first interview you described your family and your journey to getting to EWU and then you described elements of family that you have built at EWU. How did you define family before you went to college? How do you define it now?
- In what ways might this understanding of family influence your collegiate experiences and who you are today?

**Section 5: Member checking emerging themes**

- I am seeing the following themes in my interviews, aspirations, leadership, trouble, and relationships. Are these a part of the experience you had?
- Which ones seem to reflect your experiences and why?

**Section 6: Wrap up Reflection**

- As you come to the end of your college experience, how did your beliefs about **yourself** stay the same or change over time? What made them change?
- As you come to the end of your college experience, how did your beliefs about **EWU** stay the same or change over time? What made them change?
- What advice would you give to others that might help them stay and complete their degrees?
- What are your hopes and dreams for your next steps and future?

## APPENDIX C

### **Demonstrative Relational Activity/Behavior**

#### **C1. Triangulation Code Sheet**

- A. Keeping goals alive; Helped with goal setting and dreaming [Encouraged to attend college and follow dreams; keep the dream alive]; helps them to believe in themselves
- B. Noticing when things seem off, checking in, and providing emotional support
- C. Points out their strengths
- D. Encouraging them to do hard things and make better choices
- E. Helping to provide basic needs
- F. Shares their own life and life lessons
- G. Encouraging involvement and participation
- H. Inviting them into the community/making a personal connection/reaching out; Helping to make things feel familiar
- I. Honest/Direct feedback that demonstrates care
- J. Listening in a non-judgmental way
- K. Feeling like they are always available/access to them
- L. Mentor Characterized by a strong level of respect and trust
- M. Mentor believing in the student
- N. Taught social skills and professional networking



**C2. Demonstrative Relational Activity/Behavior Chart**

Family	Motivation	Relationships	Trouble	Why Stay?	Other
SC4D SC6A SC15 SC16 SC17 SC19	SC1 SC3 SC18 SC19 SC20	SC1 SC2 SC3 SC4 SC4A SC4B SC4C SC4D SC5 SC6 SC6A SC6B SC7 SC8 SC16 SC17 SC18 SC20A	SC4 SC10 SC15	SC9	SC2 (athletics)  SC3 SC4A SC5 (organizations)  SC10A (Institutional challenges)  SC11 SC12 (International student issues)  SC13 SC14 SC14A SC14B (hbcus)  SC20 SC20B SC21 (future)
JT2 JT3 JT15	JT1 JT3 JT7B JT8A	JT4B JT7 JT7A JT7C JT7D JT8 JT8A	JT6 JT6A		JT1 JT13 JT14 (future)  JT4 JT4A JT12 (hbcus)  JT4B (institutional promise/marketing/promotion)  JT5 JT5A JT6A (organizations/events)  JT9 (self-reflection)  JT10 JT11 JT11A (Institutional challenges)
PJ2 PJ5 PJ20	PJ1 PJ20	PJ2 PJ3 PJ5 PJ6 PJ14 PJ15 PJ16 PJ17 PJ18 PJ19	PJ6 PJ22 PJ23	PJ10 PJ12 PJ13 PJ21	PJ3 PJ5 (school acceptance/choice)  PJ4 (hbcus)  PJ7 (homesick)  PJ8 (Course delivery)  PJ9

					<p>(Campus events)</p> <p>PJ10A PJ12 (organization/campus position)</p> <p>PJ11 (Student programming)</p> <p>PJ24 PJ27 (future)</p> <p>PJ25 PJ26 (institutional challenges)</p>
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