HBCU PROUD AND AT RISK: EVALUATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN

ACES AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN BLACK FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE

STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

Few studies have studied the impact of trauma on academic performance and even fewer have studied Black students. Black college students are usually from a lower socioeconomic class which puts them at a greater disadvantage and a higher risk for dropping out of college. This study is a mixed-method research design. Participants included 44 undergraduate students recruited from a university in the Southern U.S. Phase 1 included paper-pencil surveys, and Phase 2 consisted of an open-ended questionnaire, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences.   This study used a Spearman Correlation to measure the strength of association between ACEs, resilience, and higher GPAs. Results from the statistical analysis indicated that there was no significant relationship between ACEs and academic performance, as measured by first-year GPA. On the contrary, resilience was correlated with both ACEs and GPA. The correlations between ACEs, GPA, and resilience suggests that resilience might be a buffer between childhood adversity and academic performance. Support, faith, and a sense of independence may contribute to academic success for students who had adverse childhood experiences. Furthermore, the results suggest that faith-based programs, positive relationships with staff, and resilience education may promote academic success and long-term professional development.

Keywords: resilience, academic performance, trauma, Black students

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Darius Loyd, Sr. Thank you for always being patient and encouraging me to keep going when I wanted to give up. Thank you for always listening and offering emotional support even when you did not fully understand the weight of my doctoral journey. I love you more than words can express.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Introduction

An extensive body of literature has focused on socioeconomic status, cultural differences, and other predictors when assessing academic outcomes (Arguete & Edman, 2019; Brogden & Gregory, 2019; Hinojosa et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2020). However, few studies have studied the impact of trauma on academic performance and even fewer have studied the impact specifically on Black students (Arguete & Edman, 2019). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are well-documented in the literature for their impact on deleterious functioning in adulthood (Arguete & Edman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2013; Dong et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2018; Jaffee et al., 2018). Childhood trauma includes sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and neglect, as well as threatening illnesses, natural disasters, incarcerated parents, and family mental illness (Agbaje et al., 2021; Boyraz et al., 2019; Dong et al., 2021). Hence, it would be worthwhile to investigate the potential impact of trauma on academic performance. Studying these factors among Black students enrolled at institutions positioned for their success could improve college retention and graduation rates for an underrepresented population of students to help promote better socioeconomic outcomes and healthier communities.

Background

Student retention is a common concern for colleges and universities. Black students who attend predominantly White institutions (PWIs) have reported more academic stressors, lower academic achievement, and less positive relationships with their professors than students attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (Arguete & Edman, 2019). Nevertheless, retention rates among Black students enrolled in HBCUs remain low. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), gradually, the percentages of degrees

conferred to Black students by HBCUs have decreased (NCES, 2019). In 2017-2018, 13% of the bachelor's degrees were conferred to Black students (NCES, 2019).

Trauma Exposure

Trauma exposure has been found to play a critical role in whether students remain in college (Boyraz et al, 2014). It has been noted that symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the first year of college predicted enrollment in the senior year, with those with greater symptoms of PTSD less likely to enroll in their senior year (Duncan, 2000). Additionally, the likelihood of dropping out was increased when students reported being exposed to multiple traumas in childhood.

Additionally, ACEs have more commonly been reported in Black students than other ethnic groups (Arguete & Edman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2014). Black college students are usually from a lower socioeconomic class than other ethnic groups, which also puts them at a greater disadvantage (Arguete & Edman, 2019). For this reason, they are at a greater risk for being exposed to more types of traumatic experiences due to living in at-risk areas, and they are more susceptible to the impact of negative life events due to decreased access to financial aid and other social resources (Arguete & Edman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2014).

Unidentified ACEs

Despite the overwhelming amount of literature that demonstrates the deleterious impact of ACEs on physical health, mental health, and academic performance, prevention efforts are not helpful when students are unable to identify their past experiences as traumatic and they are unaware of the impact that past experiences are having on their current lives. For many, traumatic events such as community violence, parental mental health and incarcerations are not

identified as traumatic, but everyday life. While some do not classify their experiences as childhood trauma, others have no memory of traumatic events at all.

Patihis et al. (2020) surveyed a sample of over 500 undergraduates in the U. S. Of those, 33% of students reported attending therapy or counseling and nearly 10% reported they had no prior memory of abuse before therapy. In a similar study by Dodier and Patihis (2021), a sample of undergraduates (N=3346) were surveyed. Of the 27% (905) of the sample reporting memories of child abuse, 23% (211) reported recovering memories of child abuse that they had no previous memory of and 9% (82 of the 905) reported that they did not know they were abused previously. Further, 90% of the latter reported having recovered their memories outside of therapy through media exposure, and/or peer discussion related to childhood abuse.

Although uncovering past trauma is not necessarily required for student success, being able to differentiate between an optimal childhood and a traumatic childhood might be the key to unlocking an awareness of adverse experiences that might be impacting their current lives and subsequently increase the chances of students getting the support they need. According to Bowen's multigenerational model, patterns of relating in the past continue in the present family system and considering family patterns is an "intervention" that helps family members see how they might change their own part in the transmission over generations (Brown, 1999, p. 97).

Cultural Barriers and Stigma

Once students are educated on what constitutes trauma, they are still left with the decision of whether they should seek help. Students of color often have cultural barriers and stigma-related issues preventing them from getting the help they truly need. A study conducted by Lannin et al. (2019) revealed several reasons students at HBCUs avoid therapy, including negative social judgment and stigma. It was suggested that students who were most aware of the

social ramifications associated with seeking therapy at HBCUs were also more likely to self-stigmatize and subsequently become more psychologically distressed. According to Lipson et al. (2018), the most reported barrier was students' interest in dealing with issues on their own, which was endorsed by half of all students in the sample. Other barriers include cultural mistrust, lack of awareness, and stigmas related to mental health issues (Avent-Harris & Wong, 2018).

The mental health needs of students of color are a growing priority on college campuses across the nation because there is a significant amount of research suggesting that students entering college with mental health challenges are at risk for poor academic outcomes (Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2019; Lipson et al., 2018). Studies suggest that mental health treatment is lower among students of color, and many suggest that this is due to higher levels of stigma. According to Lipson et al. (2018), there are over 17 million students enrolled in colleges and universities across the country and 40% of those represent students of color. The 6-year bachelor's degree graduation rate is less than 60%, and for African American students, the rates are considerably lower than other ethnic groups. Because the literature demonstrates that students of color are found to have a higher incidence of depression and other psychological diagnoses than their White peers, evaluating and addressing the mental health needs of students of color is critical to supporting their academic success (Lipson et al., 2018; Mall et al., 2018).

In another study conducted by Arday (2018), it was noted that within African American families, they are continuously reminded of the sacrifices made for them to attend a university, and therefore there is an expectation of continuous resilience. One student reported that she feared being disowned by her family if she reported struggling to get mental health support because it is not a topic that is openly discussed within the Black culture (Arday, 2018). This

statement is widely held among people of color and limits their ability to receive the help they truly need to improve their chances of academic success.

Protective Factors

Although the data suggests that Black students do not perform as well as students of other ethnicities, there is plausible reasoning to study the success of the 13% who do well (NCES, 2019). Hence, while we know that Black students are reportedly at a greater risk for ACEs, it is also known that there is a great deal of students who will matriculate successfully and complete their degree within six years despite adversity. Although research suggests that nearly 60% of all US adults are adversely affected by ACEs, not every child who experiences ACEs will subsequently develop PTSD (Dong et al., 2021; Hinojosa et al., 2019). The role of protective factors that aid in the process of coping and adaptation that allows an individual to overcome the negative impact of adverse experiences is defined as resilience (Cheung et al., 2021; Morales, 2014). Resilience theory (RT), when applied to an academic setting, looks at success over time and evaluates those students who were successful, and then asks why and how (Morales, 2014). Because RT evaluates success on a continuum, the retentive benefits of specific attributes can be assessed.

The resilience model provides a sense of how various protective factors can complement each other while also contributing to the success of the student (Morales, 2014). Resilience research and theory differentiate themselves by providing a comprehensive understanding of academic performance of poor and ethnic minority students and provides colleges and universities with a tool that could potentially improve and duplicate the attributes that successful underprivileged students have acknowledged as essential to their success (Morales, 2014).

In a study conducted by Edman et al. (2015), it was shown that Black students reported greater traumatic experiences than their peers of other ethnicities, but they were no more likely to exhibit PTSD and depression than other ethnic groups, which led the authors to suggest that Black students showed greater resilience to trauma than other ethnic groups. Although resilience is one of the key factors to academic success in the literature, a quantitative measure will allow for a plethora of other factors to be revealed.

This study combines semblances of childhood trauma and adulthood implications, while also highlighting resilience in the face of adversity. It is grounded on the rich biblical truths found in scripture that garner strength, persistence, and perseverance in the face of adversity. Through scripture, it is taught that trials are what test faith, which subsequently produces perseverance (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, James 1:3). All throughout scripture, there are accounts of resilience and perseverance. Many of the followers of Christ were persecuted yet showed great character in the face of adversity. Job, discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, was known as a man who was blameless and upright in the eyes of God (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Job 2:3). Like many present-day believers, Job suffered great loss due to no fault of his own. Despite his trials, Job never lost faith in God. He endured and God rewarded him for his perseverance and faithfulness.

Problem Statement

It is known from research that ACEs have significant implications for health outcomes (Boyraz & Ganda, 2019; Henry et al., 2018; Oehme et al. 2019). Additionally, research shows that childhood trauma increases the risk of psychosocial stress in adulthood (Agbaje et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2021). Although there is an extensive body of research that

addresses how trauma impacts physical, mental and emotional aspects of adult life, less is known about how trauma impacts academic performance (Arguete & Edman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2016; Boyraz et al., 2019). Few studies have looked at academic performance in Black students who, according to the literature, are at greater risk for being exposed to traumatic experiences than other ethnicities due to living in at-risk environments and also show poorer performance in college (Arguete & Edman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2016).

It has been proposed that Black students tend to do better at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) suggesting that the social support systems embedded in the HBCU environment serves as a protective factor against the effects of trauma (Arguete & Edman, 2019; Walker, 2015). However, research suggests that an estimated 80% of students who attend HBCUs do not complete their degree program within six years (Komarraju et al., 2013). More research is needed to investigate the impact of childhood trauma experiences on Black students. For those students who do well despite childhood adversity, the protective factors that contribute to their college success need to be identified in order to intervene early on in their academic career and bring awareness to not only the students, but faculty, staff, and administrators to increase college retention and overall academic success.

Much of the current literature is not generalizable to minority ethnic groups. The samples are majority White. While a small portion of the literature has evaluated academic success in Black students with a history of ACEs, an even smaller body of literature measures barriers to academic success in environments where Black students are expected to perform well. We know from the literature that Black students are disproportionately more likely to experience ACEs than their peers from other ethnic groups. We also know that there is an extensive body of research that suggests Black students do not perform well at PWIs due to the lack of support,

comraderies, and faculty relationships. While much of the data would suggest that students of color should perform better academically at HBCUs, we know from the literature that this has not proven true. Graduation rates remain significantly low for students of color regardless of the college or university of choice.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this mixed methods study is to explore the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance in first-year Black college students. Furthermore, this study will identify the perceived protective factors that increase academic success in students who self-report adverse childhood experiences. The literature needs to be expanded to determine the unspoken, unidentified issues that might be impacting academic performance in areas where students of color should be excelling. The literature supports the impact of ACEs on both physical and psychological well-being; however, more research is needed to expand the literature on the impact of ACEs on first-year students, particularly students of color. Understanding the risk factors involved can provide critical implications not only for students, but also faculty, administrators, and campus-based counseling centers. Such research could also enhance the first-year curriculum and pedagogy at HBCUs. More importantly, this research could improve college retention and graduation rates for an underrepresented population of students to help ensure better socioeconomic outcomes and healthier communities.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Quantitative Research Question

RQ1: What is the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance, as measured by first year GPA, in first-year college students attending HBCUs?

Qualitative Research Question

RQ 2: How do Black college students who self-report at least one adverse childhood experience and a first year cumulative 3.0 GPA describe factors related to their academic success?

Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: Adverse childhood experiences will be negatively correlated with academic performance, as measured by first year GPA.

Hypothesis 2: Higher scores of adverse childhood experiences and higher GPA will be correlated with higher scores of resilience.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

Potential limitations of the study might include self-report biases. Anytime there are self-report measures, there is a chance that validity and reliability will be decreased. Relying on one person's report versus including other sources also impacts the data because the measures are based on memory, which cannot be confirmed. Another limitation of the study is generalizability. Because the study will be conducted on Black students attending an HBCU, it cannot be generalized to other ethnicities or other institutions. Although the study may yield results that support the negative impact of ACEs on poor academic performance, the study will not be able to show causality. For this reason, it could be suggested that there are other

confounding variables that might be contributing to poor performance that have nothing to do with ACEs.

The anticipated challenges are isolating first-year students from other college classifications. While all students must take general psychology, not all of them will take the course during their first year. There are several junior-level students who might take the course as an unrelated elective. Another challenge might be a lower number of students who are willing to participate in Phase 2 of the study and answer additional questions online. While some students might be willing to complete a survey, some may not feel comfortable with sharing their experiences on an individual basis. There might also be cultural barriers. Some Black students are not as open to discussing past experiences due to cultural beliefs about sharing with people outside of their immediate family. Although the study is well-intended, data collection could impede upon class time that the instructor views as critical to the set curriculum. Additionally, the more involvement from outside parties (registrar's office, administrators, etc.), the more of a chance for unanticipated challenges.

Definition of Terms

The following is a list of definitions of terms that are used in this study.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) – potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood before 18 years of age (Center for Disease Control, CDC)

Academic Performance – measured by a student's grade point average (Alhadabi & Karpinski, 2020).

Developmental Trauma – an assortment of distressing childhood experiences, such as mistreatment, interpersonal violence, abuse, assault, and neglect (Arnekrans et al. 2018).

Historically Black College and University (HBCU) –any nationally accredited historically black college or university established prior to 1964 with the chief mission of educating Black Americans (Crew, 2017).

Childhood Maltreatment – the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age (World Health Organization, WHO)

Predominantly White University (PWI) – institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (Lomotey, 2010).

Resilience – the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress (American Psychological Association)

Socioeconomic Status (SES) – the social standing or class of an individual or group measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation (American Psychological Association)

Significance of the Study

The research findings of the proposed study could expand the literature by increasing the awareness of how Black first-year college students navigate early adulthood after experiencing or being exposed to childhood trauma. The study could also uncover a rationale for poor academic performance despite Black students being immersed in an environment that should breed support and community. Much of the current research captures a small percentage of Black students. The majority of those studies were conducted at predominantly White institutions, which does not provide generalizability. Therefore, studying Black students within an environment that was created to be conducive to their academic growth and personal development could provide insight for future research studies.

This study could potentially provide significant implications for HBCUs. If found to have a significant effect, the university could begin implementing professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to be trained on trauma-informed pedagogy. If through the interview process resilience becomes a common theme, administrators might be interested in developing resilience education for students as a part of their first-year experience curriculum. There are also opportunities to foster relationships between students and counseling centers to build trust and rapport to encourage students to proactively seek help before their academic success is negatively impacted. All the implications mentioned could potentially be employed at any college or university regardless of the predominant ethnic groups.

Summary

In conclusion, it is known that ACEs are well-documented in the literature for their impact on physical, mental, and emotional well-being. However, little is known about how ACEs influence academic performance. Few studies have focused on the impact of ACEs on academic performance, and even fewer have focused specifically on Black students. Of the studies that have focused on Black students, a significant amount of them were conducted at predominantly White institutions, which does not account for student experiences outside of those settings. While some would suggest that this disparity is a result of Black students not being able to relate to peers, faculty, and administrators, the literature suggests that Black students are not performing well academically at HBCUs either.

The proposed study will seek to explore how ACEs impact academic performance. It will also explore the factors that contribute to academic success for those who report experiencing at least one or more ACEs. The results of the study could provide implications for future trauma-informed educational practices and pedagogies at colleges and universities. The

study could also encourage better rapport between university counseling centers and students to help minimize the impact of ACEs on long term academic, personal, and professional achievement. More importantly, students will be given an opportunity to share their lived experiences with childhood trauma and influence change in other colleges and universities.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Student retention is not a new concern for colleges and universities. Research efforts have been focused on cultural differences, economic status, and gender differences; however, few studies have been conducted to study the impact of trauma on academic performance and even fewer studies on African American students (Aruguete & Edman, 2019). Developmental trauma refers to a variety of distressing childhood experiences such as violence (physical, sexual, or emotional), neglect, abuse, and childhood maltreatment. This is significant because lower grade point average (GPA), excessive alcohol intake, and other substance use disorders have been associated with individuals who experienced childhood traumas (Arnekrans et al., 2018; Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Forster et al., 2018; Krinner et al., 2020).

There is a growing body of literature suggesting that African American students are at greater risk for childhood adversity than other ethnic groups (Hampton-Anderson et al., 2021). Some of the research suggests that Black college students are not performing well academically due to cultural barriers and harmonious support; however, there is growing evidence that Black students are also not thriving in academic environments where they have support and comradery on campus (Johnson et al., 2017). Consequently, more critics are questioning the relevance of historically Black colleges in the 21st century (Johnson et al., 2017; Kim & Conrad, 2006). This suggests that there are other factors that might be impacting student success and calls for additional research to fill these critical gaps. This study will seek to identify whether childhood trauma is the factor that is negatively impacting academic performance in Black students enrolled at institutions set up for their success. This study will also identify protective factors that are aiding student success despite challenges.

Description of Research Strategy

The researcher used reputable electronic databases to collect the research for the literature review. These included the Liberty University online library and Google Scholar. The current educational statistics were pulled from the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Educational Statistics. The keywords used were the following: *high school retention, college dropout rates, college dropout rates in African American students, the impact of adverse childhood experiences, ACEs and academic performance, ACEs and physical health, ACEs and psychological well-being, Black students attending PWIs, Black student attending HBCUs, trauma and academic performance, the prevalence of trauma in the African Americans, the utilization of campus-based counseling centers, childhood trauma and academic performance, resilience in college students, and resilience in African American college students.* Delimitations were articles published within the previous five years. The bible hub and bible gateway were used to research terms and scriptures for the biblical integration.

Theoretical Framework

This study will be guided by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory. Researchers have suggested using this approach when studying maltreatment, a form of trauma, and academic functioning (McGuire & Jackson, 2018). The bioecological approach suggests that one cannot fully understand development without considering how a person is simultaneously influenced by different levels of the environment (Feldman, 2020). The bioecological approach will be relevant to this study because it allows for a thorough examination of how traumatic experiences affect Black students not only on an individual level,

but also within the context of family and external systems. Further, this theory supports the current literature that demonstrates the idea that families are systems, and when one system is impacted, all are impacted in some way.

The bioecological approach posits that five levels of the environment simultaneously influence individuals: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Feldman, 2020). Level 1, or the microsystem, is the daily, immediate environment in which a person leads their everyday lives. This system would include the home, friends, and parents or caregivers. Level 2 is the mesosystem, which offers associations between the different components of the microsystem by linking parents or children, employee to employers, students to professors, etc. Here, it shows the relationships that bring individuals together. Level 3, the exosystem, signifies broader influences including the community, church, local media, and local government. These systems can directly impact a person's development and affect how the previous two levels function. Level 4, the macrosystem, reflects the larger cultural influences on an individual such as religion and political values. Finally, level 5, or the chronosystem, underlies each of the previous systems. It includes the historical events and changes that impact one's development.

The bioecological approach highlights the notion that influences are interrelated and affect human development (Feldman, 2020). As previously mentioned, as one system changes so does other parts of the system. For example, a poor high school education can impact a student's readiness for college and possibly have other long-term consequences. Alternatively, there are instances when changes on one level may have minimal impact if other levels do not change as well. For instance, improving a university's prevention efforts to identify trauma during the first semester may not improve a student's academic success if they receive no

support from family to receive mental health services. Additionally, the bioecological approach

emphasizes the importance of cultural factors that impact development. Researchers who study

development across the lifespan assess how association in cultural groups influence behavior

(Feldman, 2020). Western culture is known for its individualistic views that emphasize one's

uniqueness, personal identity and freedom. This is important because it highlights how cultural

values shape the way people think and ultimately behave.

On an individual level, research has consistently shown that childhood trauma

significantly impacts people into adulthood in several areas including physically, emotionally,

and psychologically (Boyraz et al., 2016; Boyraz et al., 2013; Hong et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2016;

Pasha-Zaidi et al., 2020). Children who experience various forms of maltreatment often have

disruptions in their ability to effectively problem-solve and regulate their emotions. As a result,

these issues may affect cognitive development and subsequently increase the risk of behavioral

problems. Cognitive and behavioral issues can be problematic and lessen a students' ability to

concentrate in class, complete assignments, or participate in activities that might help with

academic success (McGuire & Jackson, 2018).

Beyond the individual, considerable disruptions at school can impact the child's

educational environment, particularly if it causes aggressive behaviors within the classroom

setting, affecting the instruction and learning of other students. This could also cause disruptions

in the home environment by causing the parents or caregivers to miss time from work or other

obligations. More importantly, continuous conflict in the school could lead teachers and

administrators to investigate neglect and may lead to out of home placement. These scenarios

are clear illustrations of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological approach and can provide great

examples of how development persists throughout various levels as well as the interconnectedness of each level.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological approach can benefit colleges and universities. The bioecological framework suggests that an individual's overall health and social functioning is based on the extent to which they have access to support from the social environment (Avant et al., 2021). This is relevant to college students because previous studies have shown that environmental and social support systems are essential for enhancing educational outcomes. According to Avant et al. (2021), academic performance was increased when there were collaborations among parents, educational staff, mental health providers, and community members. As it relates to higher education, these networks also act as buffers and help to diminish threats to academic success.

Universities could also benefit from adopting the bioecological framework by increasing the faculty and staff's awareness of how external systems influence student development. As opposed to seeing students as individuals, it would be more beneficial to see them as a part of various interconnected systems that impact how they view the world and approach their academic endeavors. In seeing students as a part of various systems, faculty would also come to realize that they are part of the mesosystem, which links students to professors. This would essentially cause a shift in perspective that would benefit all parties involved. While the faculty would have a greater sense of how the student functions within the microsystem, instruction and mentorship could also be delivered in a way that increases a student's chances of excelling academically; hence, impacting the broader culture the student is a part of, the macrosystem. Increasing the faculty's awareness of the various systems can also provide opportunities for early

intervention, which is critically important for students who experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

The number of students entering college with at least one ACE is disturbing. According to a study conducted by Boyraz et al. (2013), nearly 75% of the sample of first-year college students reported lifetime exposure to traumatic events and were at an increased risk for low academic achievement. On the contrary, students who were involved in campus-based activities and higher levels of academic integration were associated with higher academic performance. This supports Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on how interconnectedness influences development (Feldman, 2020). Although being interconnected does not always ensure success, depending on the nature of the influence, it does increase a student's success within the right context.

The more integrative support colleges and universities provide, the better academic outcome for students. Biblically, scripture encourages systems and community. According to scripture, where there is no guidance, the people fall; but in an abundance of counselors there is safety (*New International Version,* 1978/2011, Proverbs 11:14). Further, scripture says that we are all members of one body, although there are many parts; each with its own function, they all form one body (*New International Version,* 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 12:12; Romans 12:4). These scriptures are the foundation of the study because they highlight the detrimental impact of ignorance, but also emphasize the framework of systems, their unique individuation, and universal significance. ACEs not only impact systems, but generations. Oftentimes, there are untold stories of intergenerational trauma that have great impact. Other times, there is ignorance to the factors that influence one's behavior likely because the memories are too painful to recall. However, there are incidences when the effect of broken systems is realized, but due to broken educational systems, cultural barriers, and stigma, students do not get the help they need. This

study aims to examine whether ACEs impact academic performance and the protective factors for those who are successful despite childhood trauma.

Review of Recent Literature

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are well-documented in the literature for their impact on deleterious functioning in adulthood (Aruguete & Edeman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2013; Dong et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2018; Jaffee et al., 2018). The original ACE study was conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente from 1995 to 1997 with over 17,000 participants (Felitti et al., 1998). Researchers conducting the CDC-Kaiser Permanente ACE study asked adults to retrospectively report on their experiences occurring prior to age of 19 years (Felitti et al., 1998; Ports et al., 2020). In the ACE Study, 10 ACEs categories encompassing three overall domains of ACEs were measured including child abuse, neglect, and household challenges.

The focus of the study was to explore how traumatic childhood events may negatively impact adult health. The majority of the participants in the study were a non-Hispanic White, middle-class sample from southern California, and therefore, not generalizable to other regions and ethnic groups. Nearly 70% of the participants reported at least one ACE and over 10% had four or more (Ports et al., 2020). ACEs, also commonly referred to as childhood trauma, include sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and neglect, as well as threatening illness, natural disasters, incarcerated parents, and family mental illness (Agbaje et al., 2021; Boyraz et al., 2019; Dong et al., 2021; Merians et al., 2019). The study found a direct correlation between childhood trauma and adult onset of chronic health and employment challenges (Felitti et al., 1998).

ACEs Impact on Physical Health

There is substantial evidence linking ACEs to weakened physical health across the continuum of development. One of the concepts that researchers have established to explain how the stress associated with ACEs impacts physical health is allostatic load. Vig et al. (2020) described allostatic load as the physiological effects of chronic activation of the stress response system, which encompasses the endocrine and nervous systems. Over time, persistent stress affects the structure and function of the endocrine and nervous systems, which alters how these systems function at rest in response to future stress (Riedl et al., 2020; Vig et al., 2020). Subsequently, the overload on the body gives way to greater sensitivity to numerous physical health conditions.

Researchers have become more interested in studying allostatic load along with biological embedding to better understand the distinctive characteristics of ACEs and describe how early life stressors cause negative health outcomes later in life (Lê-Scherban et al., 2018; Vig et al., 2020). Biological embedding follows life experiences that encourage long-term and constant changes in one's biology and developmental course, which subsequently impacts behavior, emotional well-being and physical health (Vig et al., 2020). Based on biological embedding, a model for childhood adversity was developed. According to this model, when children experience stress, behavioral and biological processes eventually affect physical health.

ACEs and Psychological Well-being

Although ACEs were originally associated with health outcomes such as obesity, asthma, heart disease, poor sleep and eating habits, and diabetes (Henry & Merrick, 2018; Pasha-Zaidi et al., 2020; Warnecke & Lewine, 2019), current research has expanded and demonstrated that ACEs also impact psychological well-being including behavioral avoidance, major depressive

disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Boyraz et al., 2016; Boyraz et al., 2013; Hong et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021). The current version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders Fifth Edition* (DSM V; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) defines trauma and stressor-related disorders as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence either directly (Criterion A1), witnessed (A2), through learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or friend (A3), or through experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details (A4). Individuals also experience symptoms in the following areas: negative changes in mood and cognitions, alterations in arousal and reactivity, avoidance of trauma-related stimuli, and intrusion symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Boyraz & Ganda, 2019).

Many studies have suggested that early exposure to childhood adversity is linked to higher incidences of depression in adulthood (Boyraz et al., 2016; Boyraz et al., 2013; Hong et al., 2018). While the prevalence varies based on the specific experience and potential repeated exposure, research suggests that an accumulation of stressful events over time may increase the risk of one developing depression in adulthood (Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Mall et al., 2018).

Prevalence of ACEs

There is significant evidence suggesting that childhood trauma is more prevalent in African Americans. The epidemiological surveys show that exposure to ACEs is a significant public health concern with over 60% of adults reporting exposure to at least one ACE and in some cases three or more (Arnekrans et al., 2018; Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Felitti et al., 1998; Hampton-Anderson et al., 2021). The original ACEs study demonstrated that exposure to household dysfunction and childhood abuse was linked to greater mortality and morbidity among predominantly White American, middle-class adults (Felitti et al., 1998; Hampton-Anderson et

al., 2021). Although the prevalence of ACEs differs by race and individuals can be exposed and adversely impacted by ACEs regardless of sociodemographic background, the majority of the current studies have found that African Americans endorse ACEs at a higher rate than White Americans and other ethnic groups (Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2013; Hampton-Anderson et al., 2021).

When evaluating the prevalence of ACEs across racial and ethnic groups, it is also imperative to consider other social factors such as socioeconomic status (SES). When considering SES across the spectrum of racial and ethnic groups, youth from low-SES backgrounds report more ACEs than those from higher SES households (Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Hampton-Anderson et al., 2021; Slopen et al., 2016). As previously mentioned, African Americans have reported more ACEs than White Americans and Latinx, and even when there is an increase in earnings, their experiences of ACEs do not decline at the same rate that it does in other ethnic groups (Hampton-Anderson et al., 2021).

According to Hampton-Anderson et al. (2021), African American students are disproportionately impacted by ACEs due to exposure to intergenerational trauma and systemic oppression of historical proportions. Essentially, unresolved childhood trauma that was experienced by the parent is later linked to inadequate parenting styles. According to Lê-Scherban et al. (2018), ACEs have been overtly associated with dysfunctional parent-child interactions, attitudes, and behaviors, contributing to vulnerable living conditions. The potential intergenerational effects of ACEs are supported by research demonstrating greater risk of negative health outcomes among children with parents who endorsed persistent trauma (Lê-Scherban et al., 2018). The lasting impact of childhood adversity extends intergenerationally, at least in the urban samples studied in this particular study.

In a study conducted by Youssef et al. (2017), 1 in 8 African Americans reported experiencing physical neglect as a child, a rate two times higher than the rate endorsed by White participants. African Americans also endorsed higher rates of parental marriage problems, witnessing domestic violence, and having a member of their household go to prison. Overall, the incidence of any ACE event was significantly higher in African Americans than in White Americans (Youseff et al., 2017).

ACEs in College Students

Studies have also shown a relationship between witnessing intrafamilial violence, polyvictimization, peer abuse, and a broad range of emotional, social, and even academic problems (Riedl et al., 2020). Experiencing early adversity can be a social determinant alone. Exposure to ACEs can impact educational attainment, employment, and poverty, which has the potential to resound across generations. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the historical relationship of ACEs and socioeconomic effects as well as the circumstances that make it challenging for some children to succeed (Ports et al., 2020).

ACEs have been largely studied in older adult populations. Much of the research on ACEs has been conducted in samples of at-risk children or general adult populations considered to be at-risk for perpetuation (Merians et al., 2019). While important, when only focusing on older adults, there may be missed opportunities to measure the impact of ACEs on younger adults before they reach adulthood. In doing so, there is an opportunity to provide intervention and education. Although understudied, some research has shown that many college students have experienced ACEs in various forms. This is important because an estimated 83% of Americans attend some form of college and the majority of them will have already experienced some form of trauma prior to entering college (Boyraz & Ganda, 2019; Merians et al., 2019).

The reported prevalence rates of college students exposed to trauma has varied depending on how the traumatic events were operationally defined and measured. The majority of the research to date has shown rates higher than 50% (Boyraz & Ganda, 2019). In a recent study of over 250 African American undergraduate students, all but one student reported one or more severe traumatic experiences (Aruguete & Edman, 2019). Men reported more traumatic experiences overall. Whereas women were more likely to report sexual traumas, men were more likely to report traumas that were non-sexual in nature including robberies and physical assault (Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2013).

Black college students are usually from a lower socioeconomic class than other ethnic groups, which also puts them at a greater disadvantage (Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Hampton-Anderson, et al., 2021). For this reason, they are at a greater risk for being exposed to more types of traumatic experiences due to living in at-risk areas, and they are more susceptible to the impact of negative life events due to decreased access to financial aid and other social resources than other ethnic groups (Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2014; Hampton-Anderson et al., 2021).

Consequently, traumas that are interpersonal, meaning they occur within the realm of interpersonal relationships, have been noted as more detrimental to student's mental and physical health than non-interpersonal types of traumas (Boyraz & Ganda, 2019). In a previous study investigating a college sample, traumas that involved betrayal were linked to a greater number of days students reported being ill and increased mental and physical health concerns within the previous month; however, those outcomes were not associated with other traumatic events. According to Artime et al. (2019; Stermac et al., 2020), women who endorsed sexual assault also reported dropping a class, changing majors, and even changing universities and residences as a

result of the assault. Such changes have the potential to ultimately impact degree completion time and increase financial costs.

Student Retention

Student retention has been an ongoing challenge for schools for quite some time, and it continues to present a problem today. Dropping out of high school is not only an educational problem, but also a serious social problem. Research suggests that students who do not obtain a high school diploma are more likely to suffer from mental health problems, become involved in criminal activity, and be incarcerated (Baker et el., 2020; Hughes et al., 2018). In the school year 2018-19, the national graduation rate was 86%, the highest since 2010-11. However, the graduation rates among Blacks and American Indians (80% and 74%, respectively) were lower than that of White students (89%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

At-risk Factors. According to Pan et al. (2020), young people who do not graduate high school are at a disadvantage in the job market and are at a greater risk of experiencing economic, psychological, and behavioral problems over their lifetime. There is a body of research that suggests that increased exposure to adverse experiences affects developmental outcomes by potentially disrupting the brain and affecting psychological well-being (Pan et al., 2020). There is also research that suggests children who experience extensive adversities are too preoccupied with allocating their cognitive resources to manage daily stress to focus on other physical, cognitive, and social development (Pan et al., 2020; Peguero & Shaffer, 2015). In this study, students who reported three or more ACEs were less likely to graduate high school and attend college. This was particularly true in students who experienced homelessness.

Family mobility has been identified as another risk factor. Students who frequently change schools are more likely to drop out (Baker et al., 2020). It is likely the instability,

constant changes in instruction, stress, and inconsistent peer affiliations that negatively affect student retention. These tendencies also lead to tardiness, school fights, and absenteeism. Correspondingly, discipline as a result of these behaviors, such as suspensions, are all linked to increased risk of dropping out (Baker et al., 2020). Similarly, suspensions and excessive missed class instruction can increase a student's chances of being retained in grade. According to Hughes et al. (2020), students who are retained in grade are more likely to leave school without a high school diploma. It was also found that grade retention increased the chances of dropping out of school for Black students relative to White and Hispanic students.

Protective Factors. Social support can act as a buffer for adversity. Having supportive adults has shown positive correlations with some forms of adversity (Pan et al., 2020), although, adult support has not been effective for young people who were homeless or experienced extensive adversity. Another factor that has been identified is academic self-efficacy. Peguero and Shaffer (2015) conducted a study and defined self-efficacy as a person's belief about his/her ability to perform a task, while academic self-efficacy was defined as an individual's self-efficacy in relation to learning and mastery of academics. The results indicated that increased academic self-efficacy was associated with lower risk for dropping out of high school (Peguero & Shaffer, 2015). The study also noted that African American students, particularly males, were more likely to have lower academic self-efficacy than their White peers.

There are a number of studies that suggest that student engagement is associated with high levels of academic achievement (Boyraz et al., 2013; Leath et al., 2019; Stevenson et al., 2021). According to Stevenson et al. (2021), engagement is defined as the degree to which students interact and perceive their connection to the school community. Students who reported higher levels of engagement were also less likely to report lower attendance and behavioral

problems including suspensions and poor attendance. These findings demonstrate the importance of connecting students to peer-led groups and activities early on in an effort to enhance retention.

Student Retention in College Students

Student retention in higher education is an ongoing, pervasive problem and can be influenced by a number of cognitive, behavioral, social and interpersonal factors. Colleges estimate retention rates, persistence from first to second year, as an indicator of success (Cheung et al., 2021). It is reported that only 62% of students enrolled in public 4-year colleges and universities graduate within 6 years, and this rate is significantly lower for students of color (Thomas et al., 2021). Students who reported greater levels of depression, stressful events prior to entering college, and antisocial behaviors during high school were less likely to continue enrollment after their first semester.

A student's first year of college can be the most exciting, yet the most overwhelming and the most important time for students. For many, the college experience is the first opportunity to live independently, yet with that independence comes instability; and while some will navigate this transition successfully, others will not and might eventually drop out of university (Willoughby et al., 2020). For students entering college from adverse backgrounds such as low SES, it can be challenging to navigate the new experience. According to Warnecke and Lewine (2019), students from poverty have been viewed as particularly vulnerable to poor long-term academic outcomes. The first year of college is a critical period because it is also the time in which most of the dropouts occur and therefore the students' adjustment in the first year is vital to sustained enrollment leading to degree completion (Boyraz et al., 2013).

The interactionalist model of student departure, established by Tinto (1975, 1993; Boyraz et al., 2013; Boyraz & Ganda, 2019), proposed that student persistence and retention are greatly predicted by certain characteristics prior to a student entering college along with their experiences while in college. Some of the noted characteristics include previously acquired skills and abilities, family background, and academic preparedness. Tinto's model underscored three college variables in determining persistence and retention: social integration, academic integration, and motivational factors such as commitment to the selected institution and graduation (Boyraz et al., 2013; Boyraz & Ganda, 2019).

Social integration was defined as the degree to which a student and the social environment of the university were congruent; how well a student could interact with the faculty, staff members, and other persons in administration, form peer groups, and attend extracurricular activities (Boyraz, et al., 2013; Boyraz & Ganda, 2019; Gipson et al., 2018). According to Pritchard and Wilson (2013), incongruence with peers has proven to be a predictor of voluntary departure. *Academic integration* referred to the level to which the student integrated into the academic climate of the university and included academic performance along with assessments of the university's academic environment (Boyraz, et al., 2013). Lastly, *commitment* was defined as the degree to which the student felt devoted or committed to the university with the goal of graduation (Boyraz, et al., 2013).

Academic integration and social integration were noted as playing a critical role in the persistence and academic achievement of African American students. Social engagement was found to be positively associated with perceived academic development and persistence among African American students (Boyraz et al., 2013). Additionally, academic integration into the institution was greatly associated with college GPA in African American males and college

persistence in U. S. Black students (Boyraz et al., 2013; Boyraz & Ganda, 2019). Consequently, African American students were more likely to matriculate into their second year of college if they reported high levels of commitment to the university in the first semester of college (Boyraz et al., 2013).

Other predictors of matriculation have been noted as psychological well-being and high school GPA. Depressive symptomology and PTSD have consistently been associated with increased odds of dropping out (Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2013; Boyraz & Ganda, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2019). A study found that PTSD symptoms in the first year predicted college matriculation in the senior year, with those with more PTSD symptomatology being less likely to enroll in their senior year (Duncan, 2000). High school GPA and first-year college GPA predicted college persistence among African American students (Boyraz et al., 2013; Boyraz & Ganda, 2019).

There are some studies that suggest emotional rather than academic variables are more indicative of attrition in first-year college students (Pritchard & Wilson, 2013). It has been suggested that emotional factors have a strong effect on how well students adapt in their first year of college. According to Pritchard and Wilson (2013), students with certain personality traits and those who possess characteristics of "adaptive perfectionists" also adjust better to college and thus have higher rates of retention (p. 18). It was also suggested that higher levels of self-confidence, self-control, and a sense of high achievement were all associated with higher academic performance (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). Additional notable factors aiding in college adjustment have been maturity, work ethic, good time management skills, and strong communication skills (Avant et al., 2021).

Differences in academic preparation have also been noted as key factors in college enrollment and persistence. Both the quality of the high school education and the rigor were noted as critically more important predictors of undergraduate degree completion than test scores alone (Leach & Williams, 2007). It was also posited that African American students are not enrolled in as many academically challenging courses in high school as their peers from other ethnic groups, which causes problems in their academic preparation. This leaves them at a disadvantage when it comes to developing the skills necessary to balance the ensuing demands of college. Subsequently, this lack of preparation often increases the chances that students will permanently drop out of college.

Black Students Attending PWIs. While Black students initially had no choice in their educational endeavors, that changed when the Civil Rights legislation forced other institutions to open to African Americans and other minority groups (Crewe, 2017; Kim & Conrad, 2006). Originally, Blacks could only attend HBCUs, and while many Blacks continue to seek education within those settings, many have begun exercising their right to enroll in other institutions. Alternatively, other institutions are recruiting the high-achieving students who were originally at HBCUs to create diversity within their programs.

Despite legislation that permits Black students to seek enrollment at PWIs, that has not decreased the reports of racial microaggressions they experience. One study conducted by Brezinski et al. (2018) suggested that African American students had a relatively high number of experiences in which they were viewed as aggressive. There were also reports of being overlooked along with having their ideas invalidated because of their race. Additionally, Black students who attend PWIs have reported more academic stressors, lower academic achievement, and less positive relationships with their professors than students attending HBCUs (Aruguete &

Edman, 2019; Boyraz et al., 2013). It was also noted that students of color attending PWIs frequently withdraw and isolate themselves (McClain & Perry, 2017).

According to McClain and Perry (2017), students of color felt that White faculty were less concerned about their needs than faculty of color. It has been estimated that only 12% of professorships at PWIs are faculty of color, which can present a challenge when students of color are looking for faculty of color to be their mentor. This is important because Black students felt that faculty of color were their greatest support, offered them extra tutoring opportunities, assisted them with funding their education, and served as mediators between the student and their families as it related to academics and other personal concerns (McClain & Perry, 2017).

Another area of concern for Black students attending PWIs has been authenticity. Black authenticity has been defined as a theoretical idea of what constitutes a true black identity, comprising the expectations of what it means to be black (Cox, 2020). What further complicates this conceptualization for Black students is the social constructs that define their authenticity, which varies depending on different variables. According to Cox (2020), philosophies about black authenticity are developed based on social class, ethnicity, and differences in generation. In other words, it depends on who is involved in the social construction as well as the social and historical position in which the construction is happening. Black students attending PWIs are always conscious of their status as minorities and the perception of others that likely comes along with that status.

Cox (2020) conducted a study including individual interviews and qualitative surveys of 44 black students at two PWIs and one HBCU. Results of the study suggested that Black students are met with microaggressions from peers, faculty, and staff daily. Interestingly, it was noted that they encounter challenges and differing opinions from both White and Black peers.

The narratives of the students suggested that Black students must consciously avoid being seen as "too black" or the "wrong" kind of black by nonblack students while simultaneously being seen as "black enough" by their Black peers (Cox, 2020, p. 184). The continuous fight to navigate within these parameters cause Black authenticity to be insecure. On the contrary, HBCU students did not endorse comparable constraints and had no reports of inauthenticity, which suggests that the social parameters of PWIs considerably influences Black students' experiences with authenticity. With data supporting the inequalities that students of color encounter at PWIs, one would assume that these students would perform better at HBCUs where they feel validated and have comradery; however, this has not proven to be true.

Black Students Attending HBCUs. For over 150 years, HBCUs have been intentional about using education as a means for addressing racial and other inequities in society. The Higher Education Act of 1965 defined HBCU as any nationally accredited historically black college or university established prior to 1964 with the chief mission of educating Black Americans (Crew, 2017). Generally, the mission of HBCUs was, and still is, to provide education for underserved, minority students. HBCUs make up over 30% of all colleges and universities in the U.S., and their ability to admit students with financial limitations and social proclivities make HBCUs a viable choice for African American students (Davenport & Jones, 2020). HBCUs are among the highest producers of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Ph. D. programs and contribute to more than half of teachers of color (Davenport & Jones, 2020; United Negro College Fund (UNCF), 2018). Another characteristic celebrated at many HBCUs is student-faculty engagement. The faculty and administration of HBCUs are diverse providing more opportunities for direct engagement, mentorships, and

positive working relationships, which are all vital to the overall success of college students (Davenport & Jones, 2020).

Although HBCUs only represent a small fraction of the nation's colleges and universities, they currently represent nearly 20% of the African American bachelor's degree recipients (Davenport & Jones, 2020; United Negro College Fund, 2018). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), gradually, the percentages of degrees conferred to Black students by HBCUs have decreased (NCES, 2019). In 2017-2018, 13% of the bachelor's degrees were conferred to Black students (NCES, 2019). HBCUs are well-known for fashioning a cohesive environment on their campuses and for African American students, this family-like environment creates a sense of community and belonging among their peer groups; however, these incentives have not increased graduation rates in African American students (Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Davenport & Jones, 2020; Gray & Swinton, 2017; Walker 2015).

Current research interests are geared toward identifying variables that increase student retention as opposed to factors that increase dropout rates. In other words, there is a growing emphasis on evaluating factors that will aid in student retention and persistence to graduation (Gipson et al., 2018). Williams et al. (2018) conducted a study to understand the probability of selected cognitive and non-cognitive factors on retention. Non-cognitive factors had no intellectual characteristics related to freshman college students such as age, gender, and financial and residential status. Cognitive factors, on the other hand, referred to students' academic and social involvement at a college. It was found that high school and first-year GPAs, American College Test (ACT) and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores were strong predictors of retention rates. In terms of non-cognitive factors, age, financial status and residential status were positively correlated with retention. It was noted that financial and residence statuses were the

strongest predictors of retention likely due to stability of having primary needs met (Williams et al., 2018).

Gray and Swinton (2017) evaluated the Success Equals Effort (SE2) policy established in 2004. The aim of the policy was to encourage effort for the sole purposes of increasing retention rates and improving student performance. In essence, by rewarding effort, professors increase the returns of student effort; hence, students learn more, earn better grades, and continue on to earn a degree (Gray & Swinton, 2017). The results of the study showed that students' cumulative GPA increased as the semester continued from first to fourth. However, it was also noted that students who did drop out had higher GPAs, which might enhance their enrollment at a different university, although this was not measured. Overall, the policy did not significantly prevent dropout rates, which leaves the question of why students continue to be unsuccessful.

Based on the review of the previous studies, there are mixed findings on the retention of African American college students (Aruguete & Edman, 2019). While some studies suggest that Black students do well at HBCUs, other studies suggest that Black students are not graduating at higher rates there either. Recent statistics also support the finding that Black student retention rates continue to decline and are not equivalent to the graduation rates of their peers of other ethnicities. This suggests that more research is needed to identify other potential risk factors that might impact student academic success.

ACEs and Student Retention

Student retention is a common concern for colleges and universities; there is evidence that childhood trauma further complicates this problem. Research suggests that over 50% of college students in the U. S. meet criteria for a psychological disorder, with nearly 70% of students entering college reporting exposure to at least one traumatic event (Warnecke &

Lewine, 2019). Poor mental health can produce negative outcomes in academic performance and subsequently low levels of educational achievement leading to increased drop-out rates and extended time for degree completion (Warnecke & Lewine, 2019).

For this reason, it is important to study trauma as a potential antecedent to barriers to good academic performance. In a study measuring enrollment in college students with a history of childhood abuse, dropout rates were higher in students with a history of abuse than those who did not report a history of abuse (Warnecke & Lewine, 2019). Additionally, by the end of their senior year, less than 50% of abuse survivors remained enrolled, compared to 60% of students who were not abused (Warnecke & Lewine, 2019). For those reporting polyvictimization, the dropout rates were the highest with an enrollment rate of 35% (Duncan, 2000; Warnicke & Lewine, 2019).

Duncan (2000) was one of the first researchers to reveal an association between trauma exposure, posttraumatic stress, and academic outcomes among college students. Although literature suggesting a link between trauma exposure and college outcomes is increasing, research in this area is still emerging (Boyraz & Ganda, 2019). Since Duncan's (2000) study, many other studies have offered support for the association between trauma exposure and academic performance.

Bachrach and Read (2012) conducted a longitudinal study and found that students who receive a PTSD diagnosis while enrolled in their first year of college achieved a lower GPA in their first year of college than students who never developed PTSD. Higher prevalence of traumatic experiences has been associated with not only lower GPA, but also low college achievement overall (Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Bachrach & Read, 2012; Bishop et al., 2019).

In a similar study, Boyraz et al. (2016) found a substantial difference in drop-out rates between students who had PTSD and their peers who did not have PTSD; 35% and 20.8%, respectively.

A previous study found that the first year of university was a critical time for students who experienced developmental trauma, which was inversely associated with grades, and students exposed to trauma were more likely than their unexposed peers to drop out of college by the end of freshman year (Bachrach & Read, 2012; Boyraz & Ganda, 2019). African American students are less likely to enroll in a four-year institution, and those who do are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution than are White students (Boyraz et al., 2013).

Black Students and Maladaptive Coping. The coping process following a traumatic event involves attempts to resolve the dissonance of what was known pre-trauma and beliefs post-trauma (Boyraz et al., 2019). During this course, people may attempt to incorporate the traumatic experience by reframing their experience in a way that supports their pre-trauma beliefs. While this can be healthy in some cases, there are incidences when people exaggerate their previous assumptions after traumatic events, which might eventually cause maladaptive beliefs and avoidant coping (Boyraz et al., 2019).

In a systemic review, greater exposure to traumatic events was associated with comorbidities such as alcoholism and substance abuse, and lower executive functioning (Arnekrans et al., 2018; Boyraz et al., 2019; Merians et al., 2019). More recently, ACEs have been linked to maladaptive coping strategies that have deleterious effects on later cognitive, social and emotional functioning, which consequently cause a greater risk for anxiety, depression, and suicide attempts (Assari & Moghani-Lankarani, 2018; Ports et al., 2020; Riedl et al., 2020; Vig et al., 2020). The distress that ensues as a result of experiencing traumatic experiences likely encourages individuals to develop behaviors, such as drug or alcohol use, that

may reduce the negative impact. It was reported that nearly 81% of adult women who receive treatment for substance use disorders also report histories of childhood abuse and/or neglect (Arnekrans et al., 2018). Life stressors can potentially impede one's ability to respond to stress. Consequently, students who have experienced developmental trauma may be especially prone to misuse drugs and alcohol.

Trauma alone has long been linked to alcohol use in adults, and self-medication models suggest that individuals use alcohol to minimize painful affect states (Bachrach & Read, 2012). There are several variables that predict academic performance and subsequent completion including high school GPA, parental socioeconomic status, and ethnicity (Bachrach & Read, 2012). Other factors tend to be psychological in nature including substance misuse. According to national surveys, alcohol has been linked to poor class performance, lower GPA, and class absenteeism (Bachrach & Read, 2012).

Protective Factors

Although the data suggests that Black students do not perform as well as students of other ethnicities, there is plausible reasoning to study the success of the 13% who do well. Hence, while it is known that Black students are reportedly at a greater risk for ACEs, it is also known that there is a great deal of students who will matriculate successfully and complete their degree within six years despite adversity. Although research suggests that nearly 50% of university students have significant levels of distress, and 60% of all U.S. adults are adversely affected by ACEs, not every child who experiences ACEs will subsequently develop a posttraumatic stress disorder (Brewer et al., 2019; Dong et al., 2021; Hinojosa et al., 2019).

It has been stated that although traumatic experiences are negatively associated with physical and mental outcomes in adulthood, exposure to traumatic events are essential to the

development of resilience. Protective factors define circumstances that lessen or eliminate the impact of risk and enhance healthy compliance and individual competencies (Türk-Kurtça & Kocatürk, 2020). Personal qualities including controlled temperament, inner locus of control, high intelligence, strong self-efficacy, and high self-esteem were identified as protective factors that foster the development of resilience; after childhood trauma, emotional self-efficacy and internal-external locus of control were greater predictors of psychological resilience (Türk-Kurtça & Kocatürk, 2020).

The role of protective factors that aid in the process of coping and adaptation that allows an individual to overcome the negative impact of adverse experiences is defined as resilience (Cheung et al., 2021; Morales, 2014). Resilience theory (RT) looks at success over time and evaluates those students who were successful, and then asks why and how (Morales, 2014). Because RT evaluates success on a continuum, the retentive benefits of specific attributes can be assessed. The resilience model provides a sense of how various protective factors can complement each other while also contributing to the success of the student (Morales, 2014).

Resilience research and theory differentiate themselves by providing a comprehensive understanding of academic performance of poor and ethnic minority students and provides colleges and universities with a tool that could potentially improve and duplicate the attributes that successful underprivileged students have acknowledged as essential to their success (Morales, 2014). In a study conducted by Edman et al. (2015), it was shown that Black students reported greater traumatic experiences than their peers of other ethnicities, but they were no more likely to exhibit PTSD and depression than other ethnic groups, which led the authors to suggest that Black students showed greater resilience to trauma than other ethnic groups.

Although resilience is one of the key factors to academic success in the literature, a quantitative measure will allow for a plethora of other factors to be revealed.

External support is another buffer for college students. When studying some of the most vulnerable populations (i.e., young adults involved in foster care), support has been a major contributor to academic success. In a study conducted by Avant et al. (2021), twenty-three foster youth who were currently enrolled in a college or university at the time of study, participated in a qualitative study in the form of semi-structured interviews. Findings of the study showed that the support from caregivers, school counselors, and other child welfare staff is what prepared them for college. However, once enrolled, they relied on campus resources and support from faculty to help them navigate their on-campus college experiences.

Bain and Durbach (2021) found that adaptive defense strategies were found to be beneficial to student survival after experiencing trauma. Adaptation used in this particular study was defined as the promotion of safety, which allowed individuals to organize internal states and provide meaning to their experiences while also protecting themselves (Bain & Durbach, 2021). Researchers noted that such mechanisms were the participants' conscious control that represented a resilient use of the mind to manage trauma, hence allowing them to display a level of maturity that enabled them to be capable of making new distinctions and integrations and to subsequently restructure behavior.

Underutilization of Campus-based Counseling Centers

Despite these findings, students of color are less likely to utilize campus-based counseling centers than their peers (Avent-Harris & Wong, 2018). Campus-based counseling may be a great fit for students due to its accessibility and low cost, but these benefits have not been enough to increase the number of students willing to seek help. The Center for Collegiate

Mental Health conducted a national study in 2009 and nearly 70 counseling centers reported that 31% of the students seeking mental health services endorsed a traumatic experience prior to or while enrolling in college (Artime et al., 2019). Researchers also collected data regarding mental health treatment use in college students and revealed that 35% of the students had engaged in mental health services in the past and nearly 75% of those students had been exposed to some form of trauma (Artime et al., 2019). A study conducted by Boyraz et al. (2016) included 484 first-year undergraduate students who had been exposed to trauma. It was found that 84% reported that they had sought mental health services, but only 5.2% had received those services from the university counseling center. A study conducted by Seon et al. (2019) reported that students who endorsed use of the counseling center had a higher GPA than students who did not.

In a qualitative phenomenological study, it was suggested that African American students were more apt to seek help from their church as opposed to counseling centers. Students reported that the church was the primary resource for coping and view traditional counseling as an option only when their situation becomes dire (Avent-Harris & Wong, 2018). Some students reported only seeking professional help when their physical health was impacted. In a similar study, one participant noted that within African American communities, they believe in the power of prayer as the only feasible intervention, and therefore do not trust the advice of psychiatrists, in particular (Arday, 2018).

Still, some considered it offensive to their family members to seek help outside of the church. One participant reported that African Americans do not generally seek counseling because their business should remain in their house; nobody needs to be privy to their business. Although the study suggested that students of color were not comfortable with seeking counseling on campus, some were able to talk about their experiences among their focus group,

suggesting that the stigma may be deriving from external influences (Avent-Harris & Wong, 2018).

Socioeconomic Impact of Poor Academic Performance

Despite the great strides that have been made to reduce the economic disparities, African Americans are still in worse financial strains than their White counterparts. African Americans continue to be disproportionately impacted by economic shifts and experience lesser earning rates than other ethnicities. One of the key factors that has contributed to this economic marginalization has been educational investments (Karanja & Austin, 2014). For example, in December of 2019, the average rate of unemployment in the U. S. was 3.7% while that for African Americans was doubled at 6.1% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, BLS, 2019). However, in the same year, for African Americans with at least a bachelor's degree, the unemployment rate was 2.8%.

This data suggests that students who complete their undergraduate studies have a better chance of socioeconomic stability. In addition to economic stability, attaining a higher education has been associated with less dependance on government assistance and lower incarceration rates (Karanja & Austin, 2014). According to the previous study, and still true today based on current BLS, earning levels are associated with educational attainments in which the earnings of bachelor's degree holders are significantly higher in African Americans. While the unemployment rate was 2.8% with a bachelor's degree, the unemployment rate was 6.2% for those with a high school diploma (BLS, 2019). These statistics support the importance of not only understanding the economic disparities in African Americans students, but also the need to study the factors that negatively impact academic achievement so that the graduation rates can be increased.

Biblical Foundations of the Study

This study combines semblances of childhood trauma and adulthood implications, while also highlighting resilience in the face of adversity. The world is full of pain and while God does not cause any of it, he does use it for his glory if we will allow him to. Seemingly contradictory, scripture encourages believers to consider it great joy when faced with trials. Through scripture, it is taught that trials are what test faith, which subsequently produces perseverance (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, James 1:3). All throughout scripture, there are accounts of resilience and perseverance. Many of the followers of Christ were persecuted for his namesake yet showed great character in the face of adversity.

Job was known as a man who was blameless and upright in the eyes of God (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Job 2:3). Like many present-day believers, Job suffered great loss due to no fault of his own. Scripture says that God offered Job for consideration to be tested (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Job 2:3). Essentially, the adversary was granted permission to take away the very things that Job held dear including his family, health, and property. Despite his trials, Job never lost faith in God. He endured and God rewarded him for his faithfulness. His story has implications for today. There are many adult survivors of childhood trauma. Many of them can acknowledge that the abuse or neglect was not their fault, yet their adult lives have been significantly impacted in a way that could have caused them to doubt God and even turn away. Yet, because of their great faith, they persist and choose to believe God even when it gets tough. Scripture states that in this world there will be trouble, however, believers are instructed to take heart knowing that Jesus overcame the world (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, John 16:33).

In the story of Rahab, it was suggested that she was living a life that was displeasing to God. Although, she was known for dishonoring God, she had a reverence for his authority, and she understood his power. When approached by men who she knew were Christ followers, she could have been ashamed, but instead she saw an opportunity for her and her family to be saved (*New International Version*, 1978/2011, Joshua 6:25). She did not allow her past to keep her stuck in a place that she knew would end in ruin. Instead, she took the opportunity to use her knowledge and past experiences to her benefit. She allowed herself to be vulnerable, which is what ultimately led to her freedom. One could assume that with her history, she had come across several men who were not of good character. One could also assume that she may have had trouble trusting men, even those who were supposed to be trustworthy. Nonetheless, she was able to move beyond previous hurts and disappointments. This is a great example of strength. This a powerful depiction of a fallen humanity and the redemptive grace of God that saves all who would believe, despite shortcomings and sin. For some who have a troubled past, it can be challenging to be vulnerable. Because she persevered and overcame the issues of her past, she was also able to save her family. This truth has significant implications for the power of generational healing. It speaks to how when one person decides to turn away from sin and chooses freedom, it can potentially change the trajectory of an entire generation.

While those stories speak of resilience and perseverance, there are some biblical examples of people who had adverse childhood experiences that later manifested in their adult lives. One could consider David's childhood neglectful. When Samuel went to anoint David as King, Jesse, David's father, brought in all of his sons except for David. It was not until Jesse was questioned for a second time that he disclosed that he did in fact have another son who was outside. It is apparent that Jesse was not aware of David's potential, which could suggest that

their relationship may not have been as intimate as the other brothers. If Jesse knew that one of his sons was about to be anointed as king, it would seem obvious that he would present them all. However, that did not happen. Instead, David was called in only after none of the other brothers were suitable. One could only imagine how young David must have felt.

Throughout 1 Samuel, scripture speaks about David's toxic relationship with Saul. It is no coincidence that David found himself engaging in a similar paternal relationship where he was being demeaned. The bible speaks of multiple accounts of Saul attempting to kill David, yet he never defended himself. Instead, he continued to pursue that relationship with Saul likely because it was an intimate relationship, which was something he did not have with his father. The toxicity did not outweigh the closeness of that relationship. Practically, relationship dynamics manifest today as attachment styles. When children do not receive what they need from those who are supposed to protect them, they generally develop insecure attachment styles in adulthood.

There are also many stories in scripture that were left untold. In Genesis, the bible speaks about Dinah who was raped by Shechem, a prominent leader. Her brothers took matters into their own hands and sought revenge, but she was not mentioned again. In Judges, the Levite's concubine was sexually abused throughout the night. She collapsed and died at the threshold of the door as she could not go any further. Tamar, described in the book of 2 Samuel, was preyed upon and raped of by her half-brother.

These stories are mentioned briefly to show the commonality in all three of these ladies' stories and the fact that there was no account of how those traumatic experiences impacted their lives. Unfortunately, for many this still holds true today. There are so many today whose lives have been impacted by traumatic events. While they have yet to share their stories, they carry

the weight of it in their daily lives. What appears as health challenges, mental disorders, apathy, laziness, poor achievement, and failure to thrive may be the residue of unspoken trauma. While stories of those who have entered eternity will never be told, qualitative research might allow individuals who are still here to share their lived experiences so that they can begin to heal and change the narrative of their futures and even generations.

Students, regardless of their trauma history, often face some of the most challenging times of their adult lives during their first year of college. For many, it is their first time being away from home and being resilient is paramount to their academic success. In addition to living independently, they are also losing many layers of support including parents, guidance counselors, and other administrative staff members who played key roles in their grade-level success. They are learning how to navigate the campus, advocate for themselves, and develop a sense of autonomy while figuring out their place in their new environment. This study is grounded on the rich biblical truths found in scripture that garner strength, persistence, and perseverance in the face of adversity.

Scripture assures that this life will be full of hard times, but also provides comfort by teaching that those who endure to the end will be saved (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Matt. 24:13). Believers are to be patient in tribulation, fervent in prayer, and continually seek the presence of God (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Rom. 12:12; Heb. 10:36). In doing these things, God promises that those who trust him will receive what is promised. Practically, students are encouraged to be patient, yet persistent in their studies and campus engagement. They should also continually seek guidance from instructors and other administrative staff to ensure their academic success and address any concerns that might impede their degree completion.

Summary

Until the mid-20th century, the majority of African American students enrolled in higher education were educated at HBCUs. Since that time, legislation has allowed for students to integrate and PWIs have become appealing for some students of color. Although not a new issue, there continues to be a pressing concern around the difficulties colleges and universities face with effectively teaching and successfully graduating students of lower socioeconomic status, which often tend to be ethnic minorities. HBCUs are seeing a major reduction in student retention. It is estimated that students who attend HBCUs do not complete their degree program within six years with the graduation rate being only 35%, while other university graduation rates are closer to 60% (Komarraju et al, 2013). By year 2022, African American students will increase their college entrance rate by 26% and will continue to make up larger percentages of students on college campuses (Morales, 2014).

HBCUs continue to battle between increasing enrollment and graduating students at a higher rate. In addition to issues related to socio-economic status, there are other barriers that likely impede students' ability to do well academically and graduate within four to six years. These include poor or unsatisfactory high schools from which the students graduated, family of origin, disability-related issues, and trauma. Students who enter college having already experienced trauma or PTSD are at a much higher risk for developing substance use and subsequent negative academic performance and are at an increased risk for dropping out and leaving college before the second year. (Boyraz et al., 2013; Waits, 2016). To improve student retention at HBCUs, it is important to assess the prevalence of developmental trauma among students of color and determine its impact on academic achievement.

It is known from the literature that Black students are disproportionately more likely to experience ACEs than their peers from other ethnic groups. It is also known that there is an extensive body of research that suggests Black students do not perform well at PWIs due to the lack of support, comraderies, and faculty relationships. While much of the data would suggest that students of color should perform better academically at HBCUs, we know from the literature that this has not proven true. Graduation rates remain significantly low for students of color regardless of the college or university of choice.

The literature needs to be expanded to determine the unspoken, unidentified issues that might be impacting academic performance in areas where students of color should be excelling. The literature supports the impact of ACEs on both physical and psychological well-being; however, more research is needed to expand the literature on the impact of ACEs on first-year students, particularly students of color. Understanding the risk factors involved can provide critical implications not only for students, but also faculty, administrators, and campus-based counseling centers. Such research could also enhance the first-year curriculum and pedagogy at HBCUs. More importantly, this research could improve college retention and graduation rates for an underrepresented population of students to help ensure better socioeconomic outcomes and healthier communities. Finally, studying the protective factors that aid in college success, despite trauma, is needed to expand the literature and provide critical insight for colleges and universities.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

Overview

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance in first-year Black college students. Furthermore, this study identified the perceived protective factors that increase academic success in students who self-report adverse childhood experiences. The literature needs to be expanded to determine the unspoken, unidentified issues that might be impacting academic performance in areas where students of color should be excelling. The literature supports the impact of ACEs on both physical and psychological well-being; however, more research is needed to expand the literature on the impact of ACEs on first-year students, particularly students of color. Correlational research was conducted to measure the relationship between ACEs, resilience, and academic performance. The study used an open-ended questionnaire to understand other factors that might contribute to academic success despite ACEs.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Quantitative Research Question

RQ1: What is the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance, as measured by first year GPA, in first-year college students attending HBCUs?

Qualitative Research Question

RQ 2: How do Black college students who self-report at least one adverse childhood experience and a first year cumulative 3.0 GPA describe factors related to their academic success?

Hypotheses

The research aimed to investigate whether there is a relationship between ACEs and academic performance in Black students. The study also measured the protective factors that are salient for academic success despite ACEs.

H1$_0$: There will be no relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance.

H1$_a$: Adverse childhood experiences will be negatively correlated with academic performance, as measured by first year GPA.

H2$_0$: There will be no relationship between the number of self-reported adverse childhood experiences, first year GPA, and resilience.

H2$_a$: Higher scores of adverse childhood experiences and higher GPA will be correlated with higher scores of resilience.

Research Design

Mixed methods research design has been recognized for over 50 years as a methodological approach in the social and behavioral sciences and consists of both qualitative and quantitative measures to create an integrated set of data addressing a research question (Regnault et al., 2017). Mixed methods design allows research questions to be studied comprehensively from different perspectives and allow the strengths of one approach to complement the limitations of another (Regnault et al., 2017). In this study, ACEs, resilience, and academic performance, as defined by first year GPA, were the variables of focus.

Correlational research was used for this study because it allowed for an investigation of the relationship between students' ACEs score, resilience score, and academic performance without the manipulation of the researcher. Quantitative analysis was appropriate because it

allowed participants' data to remain confidential and minimize any risk of harm. This method allowed students to assess and self-report their ACEs score, resilience score, and academic performance by using a survey. Qualitative analysis was suitable for understanding how students described the factors related to their academic success despite an extensive exposure to childhood trauma. This method allowed students to share their lived experiences and provide a rich depth to the phenomenon.

Participants

Data was collected from first-year college students attending an HBCU in the Southern United States. Based on the power analysis with medium effect size and an alpha of .05, 42 participants were needed. Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses. Inclusion criteria required participants to self-identify as a person of color. Participants had to also identify as freshman to be included in the study. Exclusion criteria consisted of (a) students who self-report as an ethnicity other than Black or African American, (b) students who classify as sophomore, junior, or senior, and (c) students who were under the age of 18. For the qualitative measure, the researcher aimed to administer open-ended questionnaires to a minimum of five students who report at least one ACE and have a GPA of 3.0 or higher. Despite multiple recruitment efforts through follow-up emails, there were only two students who completed the open-ended questionnaire. The selected students were asked a series of questions to explore their lived experiences as Black first-year college students with a history of adverse childhood experiences. Once completed, the researcher evaluated responses was to identify themes.

Advertisement and Recruitment. The researcher wrote to obtain permission from the Chair of the Department of Psychology at Southern University and A & M College. The psychology instructors were contacted via email for permission to use class time to recruit

participants. Additionally, to recruit students within the psychology department, flyers were posted on all three floors by the elevators. Participants for the open-ended questionnaire were recruited from the sample of students who participated in Phase 1.

Study Procedures

After review of the current literature, research questions and hypotheses were developed based on gaps in the literature. The instruments were selected based on the areas of focus and included a demographics questionnaire (Appendix A), Adverse Childhood Experiences Study Questionnaire (ACE-SQ) (Appendix D), and the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) (Appendix E).

Approval was requested and received from Liberty University and Southern University and A & M College's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting this study. Upon approval from both IRBs, data collection began. Upon approval of the surveys and recruitment strategies, electronic communication via email was sent to the Chair of the department of psychology and professors to receive approval to recruit their undergraduate students. Professors were also provided with verbiage to be read to students in preparation of the data collection process. Upon approval, the consenting students were provided with a numbered research packet containing a demographic questionnaire, the ACE-SQ and the BRS. There was no compensation provided by the researcher.

Data was collected in two phases: Phase 1 was completed on campus in a classroom setting. The researcher was present to assist and answer any questions. In Phase 1, participants completed a series of paper-pencil surveys. The survey included demographic measures of gender, college classification, and GPA in addition to the scales described previously. Students who agreed to participate began by signing the informed consent form (Appendix B).

Students who reported at least one adverse childhood experience and a first year cumulative 3.0 GPA were invited to participate in Phase 2 of the study. These students were invited via email after data collection for Phase 1 was completed. Students who documented interest in participating in Phase 2 of the study and provided an email address was sent a link to complete an open-ended Qualtrics questionnaire. The researcher screened to determine student's eligibility for Phase 2, and those who met the criteria were sent the link to participate in Phase 2. When students clicked on the link, they were automatically taken to the consent where they were given the option to continue with the study. Those who selected 'yes' and consented to the study were then taken to answer additional questions. The Qualtrics survey consisted of a series of open-ended questions to explore their lived experiences as Black first-year college students with a history of adverse childhood experiences. Questions were based on a similar study conducted by Brogden and Gregory (2019). Coding was completed to identify themes.

Instrumentation and Measurement

Adverse Childhood Experience Study Questionnaire (ACE-SQ Questionnaire; Zanotti et al., 2018)

The Adverse Childhood Experience Study Questionnaire (*ACE-SQ*) is a 10-item questionnaire that assessed various types of ACEs prior to the age of 18. Participants indicated a 'yes' (scored as 1) or 'no' (scored as 0). Students who scored at least 1 were considered at greater risk than students who scored zero (Negriff, 2020). The higher the score, the higher the risk for poor academic performance. The test-retest reliability coefficient for the ACE-SQ was good at $r = .71$ (Zanotti et al., 2018). The questions related to childhood trauma demonstrated good convergent and discriminant validity and had a high internal consistency ranging from 0.79 to 0.94 (Bernstein et al., 1994).

Academic Performance

Academic Performance was measured by self-reported GPA. To comply with the family educational rights and privacy act (FERPA), GPA was not validated.

Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008)

Resilience has been described as a process involving the personal characteristics that enable one to thrive and cope despite adversity (Arnekrans et al., 2018). Similar to a previous study, the BRS was used to measure resilience. The BRS is a brief, self-rated assessment with 6 items that assess, on a 5-point Likert scale, an individual's ability to bounce back from tough situations. Each statement consists of a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores represented higher levels of resilience. The BRS has been shown to have strong internal consistency (.80 to .91) and test-retest reliability ($r = .69$) (Haktanir et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2008). When measured for convergent validity, the BRS was positively correlated with resilience measures and "active coping and positive reframing", and negatively correlated with self-blame (Smith et al., 2008, p. 197).

Open-ended Questionnaire

The open-ended questions used for Phase 2 of the study were adopted from a previous study measuring resilience in college students with ACEs (Brogden & Gregory, 2019). The questions asked helped the researcher gain an understanding of students' lived experiences. Students who documented interest in participating in Phase 2 of the study and provided an email address were sent a link to complete a Qualtrics survey. Those who met criteria were automatically taken to answer the questions. For example, one of the questions asked, "How do your childhood experiences affect your progress in college?" (Brogden & Gregory, 2019).

Operationalization of Variables

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) – is a ratio variable and was measured by total score on the Adverse Childhood Experience Study Questionnaire (Zanotti et al., 2018).

Academic Performance – is an ordinal variable that was measured by the students' self-report GPA.

Resilience – is an ordinal variable that was measured by the Brief Resilience Scale that asked participants to select the category they fall within (Smith et al., 2008).

Data Analysis

This study used a Spearman Correlation to analyze the data. This method allowed for analysis of the strength of association between ACEs and academic performance. The Spearman Correlation also measured the relationship between ACEs, resilience, and higher GPAs. Following data collection, the data was manually entered into a spreadsheet. Incomplete surveys were removed from the data. Responses were imported into SPSS 25.0 for analysis. To ensure accuracy, the researcher maintained a journal of coding keys to ensure consistency when coding responses. To maintain confidentiality, the packets were numbered so that each consent corresponded with survey material. The informed consent forms were kept in a separate locked file box. Phase 2 consisted of an open-ended questionnaire, which allowed for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences. The researcher conducted a qualitative content analysis. Because there were only two responses, no additional software was needed for coding and themes.

Delimitations, Assumptions, and Limitations

Delimitations were noted for this study as the researcher established the following criteria: (a) participants must identify as Black or a person of color and (b), students must be freshman to participate in the study. The delimitations were necessary because the study aimed to investigate the relationship between ACEs and first-year academic performance, particularly in students of color. The researcher assumed that ACEs would be significantly prevalent in students of color. The researcher also assumed that students with a higher incidence of ACEs would also be performing worse than their peers with fewer ACEs. Lastly, the researcher assumed that students who were doing well academically at the time of the study despite ACEs were more likely to report higher levels of resilience.

Some limitations of the study included generalizability and self-report biases. Because the study was conducted on Black students attending an HBCU, it cannot be generalized to other ethnicities or other institutions. Self-report measures are questionable because they rely on one's memory; hence, there is a chance that validity and reliability will be decreased. Although the results of the study yielded results that support a positive correlation between resilience and academic performance, the study does not show causality. For this reason, it could be suggested that there are other confounding variables that might be contributing to positive academic performance that have nothing to do with resilience.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the intended methodology and instrumentation to be used in the proposed study. The researcher recruited 44 participants to participate in Phase 1 of the mixed method study. The surveys obtained demographic information and consisted of the ACE-SQ and BRS. Upon completion of the paper-pencil surveys, the data was manually input

into a spreadsheet to later be entered into SPSS 25.0 software for data analysis. Participants who scored at least one ACE and reported a minimum of 3.0 GPA were invited to participate in Phase 2 of the study via email. The researcher administered open-ended surveys to two students. Students completed an electronic open-ended questionnaire and described the factors that have contributed to their academic success thus far. Upon completion, the researcher reviewed the questionnaire for common words and phrases in order to create themes. Chapter 4 will include a presentation and report of results.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance in first-year Black college students. Furthermore, this study identified the perceived protective factors that increase academic success in students who self-report adverse childhood experiences. Data was collected in two phases: Phase 1 was completed on campus in a classroom setting. The researcher was present to assist and answer any questions. In Phase 1, participants completed a series of paper-pencil surveys. The survey included demographic measures of gender, college classification, and GPA in addition to the ACE-SQ and BRS. Students who agreed to participate began by signing the informed consent form (Appendix B). Only students who documented interest in participating in Phase 2 of the study, reported at least one adverse childhood experience, and reported a first year cumulative 3.0 GPA were invited to participate in Phase 2 of the study. Those participants received a separate link to complete an open-ended Qualtrics survey. This chapter will provide a description of results, study findings, and a brief summary of key results.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Quantitative Research Question

RQ 1: What is the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance, as measured by first year GPA, in first-year college students attending HBCUs?

Qualitative Research Question

RQ 2: How do Black college students who self-report at least one adverse childhood experience and a first year cumulative 3.0 GPA describe factors related to their academic success?

Hypotheses

The proposed research aims to investigate whether there is a relationship between ACEs and academic performance in Black students. The study will also measure the protective factors that are salient for academic success despite ACEs.

$H1_0$: There will be no relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance.

$H1_a$: Adverse childhood experiences will be negatively correlated with academic performance, as measured by first year GPA.

$H2_0$: There will be no relationship between the number of self-reported adverse childhood experiences, first year GPA, and resilience.

$H2_a$: Higher scores of adverse childhood experiences and higher GPA will be correlated with higher scores of resilience.

Descriptive Results

The data set originally included 56 participants. Six participants were removed because they did not classify as freshman, and therefore did not meet the inclusionary criteria to complete the study. An additional six participants were removed because they submitted incomplete packets, meaning they either did not sign the consent form, or they did not complete the

survey(s) in its entirety. After excluding 12 participants, the final data set consisted of a total of 44 participants. Participants were recruited from an HBCU in the Southern region. Of the 44 participants, 57% were female (N = 25), as compared to 43% male participants (N = 19). 100% of the sample identified as Black or African American (N = 44).

Instruments

The Adverse Childhood Experience Study Questionnaire (*ACE-SQ*) is a 10-item questionnaire that was used to assess various types of ACEs prior to the age of 18. Participants indicated a 'yes' (scored as 1) or 'no' (scored as 0). Students who scored at least 1 were considered at greater risk than students who score zero (Negriff, 2020). The higher the score, the higher the risk for poor academic performance. Past research demonstrated the test-retest reliability coefficient for the ACE-SQ was good at r = .71 (Zanotti et al., 2018). The questions related to childhood trauma demonstrated good convergent and discriminant validity and had a high internal consistency ranging from 0.79 to 0.94 (Bernstein et al., 1994).

The study measured participants in two categories; participants who scored zero and participants who scored one or more. The mean for this study is .79 indicating that a significant number of students reported at least one ACE. The majority, (66%;(N=29) of participants reported having experienced their parents' divorce before the age of 18. Additionally, there were a noteworthy number of participants who reported feeling unloved and unsupported, as well as feeling afraid or humiliated by a parent or adult in the household. For both questions, 32% (N=14) of participants selected a 'yes' response.

Table 1: *ACEs Frequency*

ACE	Frequency	Percentage
Parental Intimidation	14	32%
Injured by parent	13	30%
Sexual Abuse	6	14%
Unloved/Unsupported	14	32%
Neglect	2	.05%
Divorce	29	66%
Physical Abuse	3	.07%
Substance Abuse	8	18%
Mental Illness	12	27%
Prison	10	23%

Academic Performance was measured by self-reported GPA. To comply with FERPA laws, the researcher did not validate GPA for accuracy. GPA was in four categories on the demographic questionnaire to give students an opportunity to make the best selection. The categories included: 0.0-2.0, 2.1-2.9, 3.0-3.9, 4.0 & above. 52.3% of students (N=23) reported having a GPA of 3.0-3.9. Only 4.5% (N=2) reported having a GPA of 4.0 and above.

Table 2: *GPA Frequency*

GPA Frequency

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0.0-2.0	4	9.1	9.1	9.1
	2.1-2.9	15	34.1	34.1	43.2
	3.0-3.9	23	52.3	52.3	95.5
	4.0+	2	4.5	4.5	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

Resilience has been described as a process involving the personal characteristics that enable one to thrive and cope despite adversity (Arnekrans et al., 2018). Similar to a previous study, the BRS was used to measure resilience. The BRS is a brief, self-rated assessment with 6

items that assess, on a 5-point Likert scale, an individual's ability to bounce back from tough situations. Each statement consisted of a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores represented higher levels of resilience. The BRS has been shown to have strong internal consistency (.80 to .91) and test-retest reliability ($r = .69$) (Haktanir et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2008). When measured for convergent validity, the BRS was positively correlated with resilience measures and "active coping and positive reframing", and negatively correlated with self-blame (Smith et al., 2008, p. 197).

The original instrument categorized resilience in three categories: low, normal, and high. For analyses, the data was coded as 1-3. A score of 1 indicated 'low resilience', 2 indicated 'normal resilience', and a score of 3 indicated 'high resilience.' The mean score for resilience was 1.97 signifying most students had normal resilience. Of the participants, 70.5% (N=31) scored in the normal resilience category.

Table 3: *Resilience Score Frequency*

Resilience Score Frequency

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	LOW RESILIENCE	7	15.9	15.9	15.9
	NORMAL RESILIENCE	31	70.5	70.5	86.4
	HIGH RESILIENCE	6	13.6	13.6	100.0
	Total	44	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: *Descriptive Statistics for all Instruments*

Descriptive Statistics for all Instruments (N=44)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
ACES	44	.7955	.40803
GPA	44	2.4773	.66433
RESILIENCE SCORE	44	1.9773	.54936
Valid N (listwise)	44		

Study Findings

The study aimed to answer two research questions: (1) What is the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance, as measured by first year GPA, in first-year college students attending HBCUs, and (2) how do Black college students who self-report at least one adverse childhood experience and a first year cumulative 3.0 GPA describe factors related to their academic success? A Spearman Correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance. An open-ended questionnaire was used to determine how Black college students who self-report at least one adverse childhood experience and a first year cumulative 3.0 GPA describe factors related to their academic success.

Spearman's Rho Assumptions

The Spearman's Correlation analysis was chosen based on the following assumptions: the data is continuous and a measured relationship but does not have an independent and dependent variable. Therefore, a correlational analysis was deemed appropriate. Further, having

nonparametric data suggested that the Spearman's Correlation was sufficient for data analysis. Further assumptions of the Spearman's Rho were met by having ordinal data, paired observations when measuring the relationship between GPA and ACEs, and finally, the variables have a monotonic relationship.

Quantitative Research Question

The quantitative research question evaluated the relationship between ACEs and academic performance, and two hypotheses were tested.

Hypothesis One

It was hypothesized that adverse childhood experiences would be negatively correlated with academic performance, as measured by first year GPA. A Spearman Correlation was used to measure the relationship between ACEs and GPA. As previously mentioned, the results of the correlational analysis presented in Table 1 shows no significant correlation between ACEs score and GPA ($r = .121$, N = 44, p = >.05). This finding suggests that ACEs had no impact on academic performance in this sample of participants.

Hypothesis Two

It was hypothesized that higher scores of adverse childhood experiences and higher GPA would be correlated with higher scores of resilience. A Spearman Correlation was used to measure the relationship between ACEs, GPA, and resilience. The results of the correlational analysis presented in Table 2 show no significant correlation between ACEs score and GPA ($r = .121$, N = 44, p = >.05), however, there was a significant positive correlation between GPA and resilience ($r = .299$, N = 44, p = <.05). Based on the effect size, the evidence suggests a moderate association between resilience and GPA. As resilience increased, GPA increased.

This finding might suggest that students, regardless of trauma history, tend to do better academically when they have higher levels of resilience.

The results of the correlational analysis presented in Table 5 show a negative correlation between ACEs and resilience (r = -.332, N = 44, p = <.05). Based on the effect size, the evidence suggests a moderate correlation. The data suggests that as the ACEs score increases, resilience decreases. This finding might imply that students with less significant trauma histories find it easier to be more resilient than their peers with extensive histories of trauma.

Table 5. *Correlations*

Correlations

			GPA	ACE SCORE	RESILIENCE SCORE
Spearman's rho	GPA	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.121	.299[*]
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.435	.048
		N	44	44	44
	ACE SCORE	Correlation Coefficient	.121	1.000	-.332[*]
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.435	.	.028
		N	44	44	44
	RESILIENCE SCORE	Correlation Coefficient	.299[*]	-.332[*]	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.048	.028	.
		N	44	44	44

Qualitative Research Question

The open-ended questions used for Phase 2 of the study were adopted from a previous study measuring resilience in college students with ACEs (Brogden & Gregory, 2019). The questions asked helped the researcher gain an understanding of students' lived experiences. Students who documented interest in participating in Phase 2 of the study and provided an email

address were sent a link to complete a Qualtrics survey. Those who met criteria were automatically taken to answer the questions. For example, one of the questions asked, "How do your childhood experiences affect your progress in college?" (Brogden & Gregory, 2019). Participant answers to each question is provided in Appendix J.

The qualitative question aimed to understand how Black college students who self-report at least one adverse childhood experience and a first year cumulative 3.0 GPA describe factors related to their academic success. To collect the data, students who self-reported at least one ACE and a GPA of 3.0 or higher, were invited to participate in the Phase 2, the qualitative portion of the study. Of the 16 participants who met the criteria and agreed to participate in Phase 2 of the study, two students completed the open-ended questionnaire. Because there were only two responses, the researcher carefully reviewed the responses to determine common themes and codes. Once participants' experiences of support, or lack thereof, were noted, the researcher identified themes from the questionnaire. After analysis, the following themes were developed: (1) self-sufficient, (2) parental support, (3) faith, (4) societal pressure, and (5) attentiveness.

Self-sufficient

Participants reported that past experiences influenced their current lives by causing them to develop a sense of independence. Independence was also attributed to making positive progress in college.

"It has influenced me to be very independent."

Faith and Parental Support

Participants attributed their faith and having the support of parents or parental figures to obtaining success despite childhood experiences.

> *"I attribute my success mainly to God....., but also my mom for always being by my side."*
>
> *"Everything I do is to make my grandmother proud."*

Societal Pressure

When asked about main challenges to being successful, both participants reported external influences.

> *"Overcoming societies doubts and obstacles."*
>
> *"Haters"*

Attentiveness

In addition to discussing challenges and positive influences that attribute to success, participants listed skills that helped them as students.

> *"Attentive and athletically motivated"*
>
> *"Study methods"*

Evidence of Quality

Credibility

The purpose of adding qualitative data to the study was to gain a better understanding of how participants described their lived experiences as it related good academic performance despite childhood adversity. Offering an open-ended questionnaire allowed for participants to freely discuss their personal experiences as they would be the most credible with unpacking and assigning meaning to their life experiences. Although a small sample, the study also addressed credibility through studying the two responses for similarities.

Transferability

Transferability suggests that results can be transferred to other populations or settings. This study was very precise in sampling because it was specific to Black students attending an HBCU. Due to the low sample size, the results may not be applicable and transferable to other Black students attending colleges and universities within the Southern region of the United States.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research can be very similar to reliability in quantitative research. This study established dependability by only sending the link to the open-ended questionnaire to students who met very specific criteria. No other participants had access to the link which was created for Phase 2 of the study. The researcher carefully reviewed the responses of each participant to ensure understanding of the questions being asked in the questionnaire.

Confirmability

Confirmability allows for the results to be confirmed by others. Because the open-ended questionnaire was electronic, the results can very easily be confirmed by viewing the typed participant responses of each participant.

Summary

Results from the statistical analysis indicated that there was no significant relationship between ACEs, and academic performance, as measured by first-year GPA. However, resilience was correlated with both ACEs and GPA. The findings failed to support the hypothesis that there would be a correlation between ACEs and academic performance in Black students attending HBCUs. However, there were significant positive correlations between GPA, gender,

and resilience. The qualitative question aimed to understand how Black college students who self-report at least one adverse childhood experience and a first year cumulative 3.0 GPA describe factors related to their academic success. Because there were only two responses, the researcher carefully reviewed the responses to determine common themes. After analysis, the following themes were developed: (1) self-sufficient, (2) parental support, (3) faith, (4) societal pressure, and (5) attentiveness.

The next chapter will provide an overview by restating the purpose of the study. The chapter will also provide a summary along with a thorough discussion of findings. Implications in addition to limitations of the study will be provided. Chapter 5 will conclude with recommendations for future research and a summary.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to explore the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance in first-year Black college students. Furthermore, this study sought to identify the perceived protective factors that increased academic success in students who self-report adverse childhood experiences. Data was collected in two phases: Phase 1 was completed on campus in a classroom setting. The researcher was present to assist and answer any questions. In Phase 1, participants completed a series of paper-pencil surveys. Students who reported at least one adverse childhood experience and a first year cumulative 3.0 GPA were invited to participate in Phase 2 of the study and received a link to complete an open-ended Qualtrics survey. This chapter will provide a summary and discussion of findings along with implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research. The chapter will conclude with a summary.

Summary of Findings

Results from the statistical analysis indicated that there was no significant relationship between ACEs and academic performance, as measured by first-year GPA. The findings failed to support the hypothesis that there would be a correlation between ACEs and academic performance in Black students attending HBCUs. It is possible that no relationship was found due to self-reported GPA, as these scores could not be validated for validity. Additionally, HBCUs are known for their family-like environment, which helps students gain the support. Research suggests that social support systems embedded in the HBCU environment might buffer the effects of childhood adversity (Aruguete & Edman, 2019).

There was a significant positive correlation between resilience and academic performance. Based on the effect size, the evidence suggests a moderate association between resilience and GPA. As GPA increased, resilience increased. Students who are more resilient might be better at bouncing back from negative life events than their peers who are not as resilient, hence, the higher GPA scores. On the contrary, resilience was negatively correlated with ACEs. Based on the effect size, the evidence suggests a moderate correlation. The data suggests that as the ACEs score increases, resilience decreases. Students with less significant trauma histories might find it easier to be more resilient than their peers with extensive histories of trauma.

After reviewing the open-ended questionnaire in Phase 2, several potential themes emerged as students described the factors associated with good academic performance despite childhood adversity. The themes included self-sufficiency, parental and social support, faith, and attentiveness. Results from the qualitative data suggest that support, faith, and a sense of independence may contribute to academic success for students who had adverse childhood experiences.

Discussion of Findings

HBCUs are well-known for creating a cohesive environment on their campuses, and for African American students. This family-like environment creates a sense of community and belonging among their peer groups; however, these incentives have not increased graduation rates in African American students (Aruguete & Edman, 2019; Davenport & Jones, 2020; Gray & Swinton, 2017; Walker 2015). Current research interests are geared toward identifying variables that increase student retention as opposed to factors that increase dropout rates. There

is a growing emphasis on evaluating factors that will aid in student retention and persistence to graduation (Gipson et al., 2018).

Based on the review of the previous studies, there are mixed findings on the retention of African American college students (Aruguete & Edman, 2019). While some studies suggest that Black students do well at HBCUs, other studies suggest that Black students are not graduating at higher rates there either. Recent statistics also support the finding that Black student retention rates continue to decline and are not equivalent to the graduation rates of their peers of other ethnicities. This suggests that more research is needed to identify other potential risk factors that might impact student academic success.

To add to the literature, this mixed methods study explored the relationship between adverse childhood experiences and academic performance in first-year Black college students. Furthermore, this study sought to identify the perceived protective factors that increase academic success in students who self-report adverse childhood experiences.

It was hypothesized that ACEs would be negatively correlated with academic performance, as measured by first year GPA. A Spearman Correlation was used to assess the relationship between ACEs and GPA. The results of the correlational analysis presented in Table 1 show no significant correlation between ACEs score and GPA. It was hypothesized that that there would be a relationship between ACEs score and GPA due to the high prevalence of ACEs in the Black community. There is also substantial data that suggests Black students do not perform as well academically as their peers of other ethnicities. Although the lack of relationship was unexpected, it is consistent with Walker (2015), who found that there was no relationship between GPA and trauma exposure in African American college students attending an HBCU.

Though there was no significant correlation between ACEs and academic performance, there were some other significant correlations found as a result of the study. The results of the correlational analysis presented in Table 2 show a significant positive correlation between GPA and resilience. As resilience increased, GPA increased. This finding might suggest that students, regardless of trauma history, tend to do better academically when they have higher levels of resilience. The results of the correlational analysis presented in Table 2 show a negative correlation between ACEs and resilience. The data suggests that as the ACEs score increases, resilience decreases. This finding might imply that students with less significant trauma histories find it easier to be more resilient than their peers with extensive histories of trauma.

Based on the moderate correlations between ACEs, GPA, and resilience, the findings suggest that resilience might be a buffer between childhood adversity and academic performance which is consistent with previous research findings. Students who are more resilient might do better academically than their peers who are less resilient.

The participant responses from the qualitative portion of the study shed light on some of factors that contribute to student success despite ACEs. After reviewing the responses, it was concluded that support, faith, and a sense of independence may contribute to academic success for students who had adverse childhood experiences. Similarly, a study conducted by Pan et al. (2020) suggested that having supportive adults showed positive correlations with some forms of adversity. Additionally, Avant et al. (2021) showed that the support from caregivers is what prepared students for college.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework suggests that an individual's overall health and social functioning is based on the extent to which they have access to support from the social

environment (Avant et al., 2021). This is relevant to college students because previous studies have shown that environmental and social support systems are essential for enhancing educational outcomes. According to Avant et al. (2021), academic performance was increased when there were collaborations among parents, educational staff, mental health providers, and community members. As it relates to higher education, these networks also act as buffers and help to diminish threats to academic success. There were many levels of the bioecological approach that were evident in this study: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Feldman, 2020).

Students who shared that their parents or caregivers were essential to their success fall within the microsystem, as this level involves the daily, immediate environment in which a person leads their everyday lives. This system would include the home, friends, and parents or caregivers. The mesosystem offers associations between the different components of the microsystem by linking parents or children. Students who shared that their faith is important would fall within the exosystem, which signifies broader influences including the community and local church. Faith could also fall within the macrosystem as it reflects the larger cultural influences on an individual such as religion.

This study was grounded on the rich biblical truths found in scripture that garner strength, persistence, and perseverance in the face of adversity. Students, regardless of their trauma history, often face some of the most challenging times of their adult lives during their first year of college. Students who participated were freshman, indicating that it is likely their first time being away from home, and being resilient is paramount to their academic success. Although navigating student life with a sense of independence while managing the impact of childhood

adversity, they both reported that having support from caregivers played a major role in their success.

Scripture assures that this life will be full of hard times, but also provides comfort by teaching that those who endure to the end will be saved (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Matt. 24:13). Believers are to be patient in tribulation, fervent in prayer, and continually seek the presence of God (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Rom. 12:12; Heb. 10:36). In doing these things, God promises that those who trust him will receive what is promised. This scripture was shown to be effective for a student who reported that God was as factor in her success.

Implications

Findings of the study suggest that the first-year experience for college students should include resilience education. While most colleges and universities provide seminars on time management, study habits, and other active learning techniques, the study has provided evidence that resilience should now be a part of the conversation. The data showed that resilience was correlated with both ACEs and academic performance. Another implication is trauma-informed pedagogy and professional development. According to the data from the study, 80% of participants reported having at least one ACE. Of those, 66% reported experiencing the divorce of their parents. This suggests that a significant number of students are entering the university having already experienced childhood adversity. Regardless of impact on academic performance, professors, administrators, and all other staff members who interface with students could greatly benefit from having personal development training based on trauma-informed practices.

Because of the large number of students who reported one or more ACE, the campus-based counseling center could be essential to student success. Ensuring that the counseling center director, counselors, and administrative staff develop positive rapport with the university could be beneficial. Good working relationships with professors could also create an alliance and liaison-type relationship which could increase encouragement, and subsequently the likelihood of students seeking professional support to manage the stressors of college. Universities could also benefit from adopting the bioecological framework by increasing the faculty and staff's awareness of how external systems influence student development. As opposed to seeing students as individuals, it would be more beneficial to see them as a part of various interconnected systems that impact how they view the world and approach their academic endeavors.

In seeing students as a part of various systems, faculty would also come to realize that they are part of the mesosystem, which links students to professors. This would essentially cause a shift in perspective that would benefit all parties involved. While the faculty would have a greater sense of how the student functions within the microsystem, instruction and mentorship could also be delivered in a way that increases a student's chances of excelling academically; hence, impacting the broader culture the student is a part of, the macrosystem.

Finally, students might benefit from having access to church or other religious practices and services, whether on or off campus. For Black students, the literature continues to provide support of faith-based practices as positive influences for success. As previously mentioned, a qualitative phenomenological study suggested that African American students were more apt to seek help from their church as opposed to counseling centers. Students reported that the church

was the primary resource for coping and viewed traditional counseling as an option only when their situation becomes dire (Avent-Harris & Wong, 2018).

Limitations

The study had a number of limitations that should be taken into consideration when evaluating the findings. The most significant limitation was the low sample size. Therefore, the power of detecting significant effects may have been low. The low number of students who were willing to participate in Phase 2 of the study also lessened the generalizability. Although there were some similar themes and codes that emerged from the two responses, having more participants may have provided more in-depth insight on lived experiences. Another limitation related to generalizability was ethnicity. Because the study was conducted on Black students attending an HBCU, it cannot be generalized to other ethnicities or other institutions.

An additional limitation was self-report. Relying on one person's report versus including other sources also impacts the data because the measures are based on memory, which cannot be confirmed. Students self-reported GPA, and to comply with the family educational rights and privacy act (FERPA), the researcher was unable to confirm the accuracy of scores. Therefore, it is unclear whether or not the scores were valid. Without access to unofficial transcripts, the results of the study may have been significantly impacted.

The amount of time allotted for student participation in the study was also a limitation. Some of the students completed the research packet at the end of class which may have caused them to feel rushed to get to their next class. This may have also affected how students scored the questionnaires.

Cultural barriers may have also been a limitation. The researcher sent an email to professors to read to students in preparation of the study. However, the emails were not read

giving students little time to prepare for the sensitive topic. The questions on the ACEs Questionnaire were very intimate in nature. Some Black students are not as open to discussing past experiences due to cultural beliefs about sharing with people outside of their immediate family.

Finally, although the study yielded results that indicated a correlation between resilience, academic performance, and ACEs, the study does not show causality. For this reason, it could be suggested that there are other confounding variables that might be contributing to good performance that have nothing to do with resilience.

Recommendations for Future Research

Despite these limitations, the study did highlight the importance of resilience education on the college campus. However, future research should aim to study a larger sample size in order to expand the literature. Additionally, when focusing on qualitative data, in-person interviews might yield better results as participants are able to verbalize their experiences in a personable environment. In-person interviews are also a good way to build rapport and trust. Future research could be extended to include upperclassmen. Students who have matriculated beyond freshman year should also be studied to determine factors that contributed to their long-term success. Based on the results of the current study, research that explores barriers to academic success unrelated to childhood adversity is needed.

Future studies could examine the buffer relationship between ACEs, academic performance, and resilience more closely. Analyses could be run to determine if there is an interaction between these three variables and to see if the relationship between ACEs and academic performance changes based on the scores of resilience.

Summary

Results from the statistical analysis indicated that there was no significant relationship between ACEs, and academic performance, as measured by first-year GPA. While there was no correlation found between ACEs and GPA, 80% of participants reported have at least one ACE suggesting that the prevalence of childhood adversity among Black colleges students is very significant. On the contrary, resilience was correlated with both ACEs and GPA. The correlations between ACEs, GPA, and resilience suggests that resilience might be a buffer between childhood adversity and academic performance. Support, faith, and a sense of independence may contribute to academic success for students who had adverse childhood experiences. Because of the incidence of reported ACEs, there is a need for licensed clinical staff from the campus-based counseling centers to be more present to enhance student success. Furthermore, faith-based programs, positive relationships with staff, and resilience education are also essential to academic success and long-term professional development.

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APPENDIX A: Demographics Questionnaire – Paper-Pencil

1. Are you 18 years or older?
   o Yes
   o No

2. Do you identify as Black or African American?
   o Yes
   o No

3. Are you classified as Freshman?
   o Yes
   o No

4. What is your gender?
   o Male
   o Female

5. What is your current grade point average (GPA)?
   o 0.0 - 2.0
   o 2.1 - 2.9
   o 3.0 - 3.9
   o 4.0 & Above

6. Do you consent to researcher's review of your unofficial transcript to confirm GPA?
   o Yes
   o No

APPENDIX B: Informed Consent

Informed Consent

Title of the Project: HBCU Proud and at Risk: Evaluating the Relationship Between ACEs and Academic Performance in Black First-year College Students
Principal Investigator: Courtney J. Loyd, LAC, CRC, CCTP
Liberty University School of Behavioral Sciences

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be at least 18 years of age, identify as a person of color, consent to researcher's review of unofficial transcript to confirm GPA, and be classified as a freshman. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to assess whether childhood trauma impacts academic performance. The study also aims to measure protective factors that attribute to student success despite adversity.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Complete two questionnaires. The questionnaires should take approximately 10 minutes to complete per questionnaire for a total of 20 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are an awareness of life events that might be considered critical to academic, personal, and professional success.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

There might be feelings of discomfort while recalling previous traumatic events. If you begin to feel uneasy, let the researcher know. A referral will be provided for the campus counseling services if needed.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes. Data will be stored in a password-protected file box and locked in the researcher's office. Data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all hardcopies and electronic records will be deleted.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Participants will receive extra credit points for their participation.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Southern University and A & M College. If you decide to

participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, inform the researcher that you wish to discontinue your participation, and do not submit your study materials. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study. If you are completing the electronic interview and you wish to discontinue your participation, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Courtney Loyd. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ███████████ ██████████████████████ You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gorbett at ██████████████

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

Phase 2:
Phase 2 of the study will consist of an electronic questionnaire. The questionnaire will consist of five open-ended questions aimed to understand the lived experiences of college students.

_____

Email Address (if interested in participating in Phase 2)

Informed Consent

Title of the Project: HBCU Proud and at Risk: Evaluating the Relationship Between ACEs and Academic Performance in Black First-year College Students
Principal Investigator: Courtney J. Loyd, LAC, CRC, CCTP
Liberty University School of Behavioral Sciences

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be at least 18 years of age, identify as a person of color, consent to researcher's review of unofficial transcript to confirm GPA, and be classified as a freshman. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to assess whether childhood trauma impacts academic performance. The study also aims to measure protective factors that attribute to student success despite adversity.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:
1. Complete an open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire will consist of 5 questions and should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are an awareness of life events that might be considered critical to academic, personal, and professional success.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

There might be feelings of discomfort while recalling previous traumatic events. If you begin to feel uneasy, please close the survey. You can contact the researcher at the contact information listed below and a referral will be provided for the campus counseling services if needed.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes. Data will be stored in an online database of which only the researcher will have access to. Data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Participants will receive extra credit points for their participation.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Southern University and A & M College. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, inform the researcher that you wish to discontinue your participation, and do not submit your study materials. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study. If you are completing the electronic questionnaire and you wish to discontinue your participation, please exit the survey and close your internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Courtney Loyd. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ██████████████████ ████████████████████████ You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gorbett at ██████████████████

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

_____

Printed Subject Name

_____

Signature & Date

Appendix D: Adverse Childhood Experience Study Questionnaire

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Questionnaire
Finding your ACE Score za hbr 10 24 06

While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often** …
   Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you?
   or
   Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
   　　　　Yes　No　　　　　　　　　　If yes enter 1　_____

2. Did a parent or other adult in the household **often** …
   Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you?
   or
   Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
   　　　　Yes　No　　　　　　　　　　If yes enter 1　_____

3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you **ever**…
   Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way?
   or
   Try to or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal sex with you?
   　　　　Yes　No　　　　　　　　　　If yes enter 1　_____

4. Did you **often** feel that …
   No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special?
   or
   Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
   　　　　Yes　No　　　　　　　　　　If yes enter 1　_____

5. Did you **often** feel that …
   You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you?
   or
   Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
   　　　　Yes　No　　　　　　　　　　If yes enter 1　_____

6. Were your parents **ever** separated or divorced?
   　　　　Yes　No　　　　　　　　　　If yes enter 1　_____

7. Was your mother or stepmother:
   Often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her?
   or
   Sometimes or often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard?
   or
   Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?
   　　　　Yes　No　　　　　　　　　　If yes enter 1　_____

8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?
   　　　　Yes　No　　　　　　　　　　If yes enter 1　_____

9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill or did a household member attempt suicide?
   　　　　Yes　No　　　　　　　　　　If yes enter 1　_____

10. Did a household member go to prison?
   　　　　Yes　No　　　　　　　　　　If yes enter 1　_____

Now add up your "Yes" answers: _____ This is your ACE Score

Appendix E: Brief Resilience Scale

Brief Resilience Scale (BRS)

	Please respond to each item by marking one box per row	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
BRS 1	I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
BRS 2	I have a hard time making it through stressful events.	☐ 5	☐ 4	☐ 3	☐ 2	☐ 1
BRS 3	It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event.	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
BRS 4	It is hard for me to snap back when something bad happens.	☐ 5	☐ 4	☐ 3	☐ 2	☐ 1
BRS 5	I usually come through difficult times with little trouble.	☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
BRS 6	I tend to take a long time to get over set-backs in my life.	☐ 5	☐ 4	☐ 3	☐ 2	☐ 1

Scoring: Add the responses varying from 1-5 for all six items giving a range from 6-30. Divide the total sum by the total number of questions answered.

My score: _____ item average / 6

Smith, B. W., Dalen, J., Wiggins, K., Tooley, E., Christopher, P., & Bernard, J. (2008). The brief resilience scale: assessing the ability to bounce back. *International journal of behavioral medicine, 15*(3), 194-200.

Appendix F: Open-ended Questionnaire – Qualtrics Questionnaire

1. How have your past experiences influenced your life currently?

2. How have your childhood experiences affected your progress in college?

3. To what do you attribute your success despite your childhood experiences?

4. What are your main challenges to being successful?

5. What skills do you have that help you as a student?

Appendix G: Permission to Recruit

Good morning,

My name is Courtney Loyd and I am a doctoral student at Liberty University. I am reaching out to ask your permission to distribute questionnaires among the freshman students in your General Psychology class(es). This is for the purpose of conducting research form my dissertation, entitled, "HBCU Proud and at Risk: Evaluating the Relationship Between ACEs and Academic Performance in Black First-year College Students".

The questionnaires should take 20 minutes to complete and would be provided in paper-pencil format. The questionnaires can be administered at a time convenient for you. Participation in the questionnaires will be voluntary. There might be some feelings of discomfort while recalling traumatic events. Any student who reports discomfort can stop the questionnaire immediately and will be provided with a referral to the university counseling center if needed. All information provided will be kept confidential and would be used for academic purposes only. The names of respondents will not appear in the dissertation or future publications.

If you agree, please send acknowledgment of your consent and permission for me to conduct this study on campus during your class time. I would greatly appreciate your approval.

Sincerely,

Courtney J. Loyd
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix H: Recruitment Letter (Department Professors)

Dear Professor,

As a graduate student in the School of Psychology at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to evaluate the relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and academic performance in first-year college students and to understand the factors related academic success despite childhood adversity. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, identify as Black or African American, and classify as freshman. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete two paper-pencil surveys along a demographic questionnaire. It should take approximately 20 minutes to complete the procedure listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ to schedule a day and time that would be acceptable to conduct the study during your class time.

A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If students choose to participate, they will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the study.

Participants may, at your discretion, receive extra credit for their participation in the study.

Sincerely,

Courtney J. Loyd
Doctoral Candidate
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Research Participants Needed

HBCU PROUD AND AT RISK: EVALUATING THE RELATIONSHIP

BETWEEN ACES AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN BLACK FIRST-YEAR

COLLEGE STUDENTS

- Are you 18 years of age or older?
- Do you identify as Black or African American?
- Do you classify as freshman?

If you answered **yes** to either of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in an academic research study.

The purpose of my research is to evaluate the relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and academic performance in first-year college students and to understand the factors related academic success despite childhood adversity. Participants will be asked to complete two paper-pencil surveys. Benefits include developing an awareness of life events that might be considered critical to academic, personal, and professional success. Participants will also receive extra credit for their participation

The study is being conducted at Southern University and A & M College
Blanks Hall
Room 128

Courtney Loyd, a doctoral candidate in the School of Psychology at Liberty University, is conducting this study.
Please contact Courtney Loyd at ███████████████████████████ **for more information.**

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515

Appendix J: Participant Responses

Questions	Participant Responses
Q1. How have your past experiences influenced your life currently?	*"It has influenced me to be very independent."* *"Yes, they have."*
Q2. How have your childhood experiences affected your progress in college?	*"Not in a negative way, only positive."* *"I'm doing really good in college and it's probably because I am very independent and focused on myself."*
Q3. To what do you attribute your success despite your childhood experiences?	*"I attribute all of my success mainly to God, because without him I am nothing, but also primarily my mom for always being by my side and my endless hours of hard work."* *"Everything I do, is to make my grandmother proud."*
Q4. What are your main challenges to being successful?	*"Mainly stress and being inside my own head. I know I am my greatest competition, so I just have to overcome societies doubts and obstacles."* *"Haters"*
Q5. What skills do you have that help you as a student?	*"I am a great listener, understanding, attentive, and athletically motivated."* *"My study methods."*