ABSTRACT

MALLOY, EBONI NICHOLE. Engage, Empower, Educate: A Case Study of Black Female Adult Learners and Their Perspective on Meaningful Faculty Interactions. (Under the direction of Dr. Susan Barcinas).

This qualitative case study explored the educational experiences of Black female adult learners by examining their meaningful interactions with community college faculty. Black Feminist Thought served as the primary theoretical framework, as this theory centers the experiences of Black women in analysis. Theoretical elements of voice, knowledge validation, and safe spaces were integrated with aspects of validation theory and adult learning theory to serve as the conceptual model. Black female adult learners (N=6) currently enrolled at a North Carolina community college described (1) meaningful interactions with community college faculty, (2) the significance of faculty interactions, and (3) the significance of other learning space interactions.

Using semi-structured interviews and reflective journals, the data revealed two key findings: intentional effort is necessary for meaningful faculty-student interaction and Black female adult learners want more from their faculty. The findings from this study indicate both faculty and students play a critical role in the cyclical process of interaction while emphasizing that Black female adult learners want faculty to initiate interactions. The women in this study want more than menial interactions with their faculty. The Black female adult learners who participated in this study want caring, understanding, and relatable faculty who take the time to initiate interactions and validate and affirm them while creating learning spaces that allow them to be their authentic selves.

Implications for policy and practice within the community college system include college leadership and administrative commitment to faculty diversification to include strategic

planning, implementation, and evaluative measures. Additionally, faculty professional development could serve to develop faculty members' capacity as validating agents. Implications for future research include studies such as examining faculty-student interactions from the faculty's perspective, exploring other understudied student populations, and examining online interactions and engagement. Lastly, this study addresses mattering on college campuses for Black female adult learners and encourages Black college women to create spaces where they feel seen, heard, valued, and empowered.

Engage, Empower, Educate:
A Case Study of Black Female Adult Learners and Their Perspective on Meaningful Faculty Interactions

by
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my late grandmother, **Julia L. Culbreth**. You planted the seeds of Black excellence and it is harvest time! I pray I am making you proud.

I also dedicate this dissertation to the **exceptional six women** who shared their voices and allowed me to retell their stories. Thank you!

BIOGRAPHY

Eboni N. Malloy was born and raised in Fayetteville, North Carolina by her mother, Deborah Culbreth. She attended East Carolina University, where she earned a bachelor's degree in business administration. During her time at ECU, she worked as a tutor for student-athletes. This began her long career helping students. Upon receiving her degree, she relocated to Charlotte, North Carolina where she worked in human resources and later worked with the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System as an In-School Suspension Coordinator. During her time in the K-12 school setting, Eboni decided to return to college and pursue a master's degree in counselor education. She returned to her alma mater of East Carolina University and began working as a Graduate Assistant Academic Advisor. During the second year of her graduate program, she was employed as a full-time counselor at her former high school.

After completing her graduate program, Eboni moved back to the Charlotte area and worked in the community college system for almost ten years in various student services roles. In 2017, she relocated to Miami, Florida where she worked as an Academic Advisor at Florida International University. In June 2018, Eboni began working as an Academic Advisor in the newly formed Advising Center at Campbell University where she was employed until she began her doctoral studies at North Carolina State University in fall 2020. Eboni's commitment to student success and interest in the experiences of Black college women prompted her to pursue a doctoral degree in Adult, Workforce, and Continuing Professional Education (later changed to Adult and Lifelong Education).

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"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;

in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths."

Proverbs 3:5–6

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Women have increased their presence in the classroom and have consistently represented a majority of the undergraduate student population over the last few decades in post-secondary institutions. Recent statistics demonstrate the significant presence female students; women constituted over half of the 15 million undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2021. Women also represented 62.8% of all adult learners fall 2021 (Allen et al., 2008; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023). Adult learners make up a substantial percentage of students enrolled in higher education and represent 40% of the student population (NCES, 2023).

Rose and colleagues (2024) define *adult learners* and provide criteria that can be applied to this group of learners including age boundaries, life responsibilities, and the learner's self-perception of adulthood. *Nontraditional student,* another term commonly found in the literature, is defined by Horn and Carroll in the 1996 National Center for Education Statistics report as one who possesses at least one of the following characteristics: (1) enrolled at part-time status, (2) employed full-time, (3) financially independent, (4) single parent, (5) having a non-spouse dependent, (6) earned a GED or non-standard high school diploma, and (7) delayed (not immediately following high school completion) post-secondary enrollment. The definition asserts many students who identify with the described characteristics are typically older than 24 years of age (Horn & Carroll, 1996). The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2023) and much of the literature also described adult learners as learners 25 years old or older and having multiple roles in addition to the role of student (Person et al., 2020; Ritt, 2008; Rose et al., 2024; Ross-Gordon et al., 2016). While adult and higher education researchers utilize various

criteria and definitions to describe this group of learners, for this study adult learner is defined as a student who is age 25 or older, assumes multiple life responsibilities and roles, and is financially independent. Community colleges enroll a significantly large adult learner population, with approximately 1.5 million adult learners attending these post-secondary educational institutions. In addition, the majority of community college adult learners are women (American Association of Community College, 2023; National Student Clearing House Research Center, 2023).

Many female adult learners choose to attend community college because of the affordability, campus location proximity, and various program options such as degrees, credentialing, and potential employability upon completion. Community colleges offer students more enrollment flexibility; over half of the student population, especially adult learners, are at part-time status (Bahr et al., 2021; Cox & Ebbers, 2010; National Student Clearing House Research Center, 2023). Taken together, these factors explain community colleges' high enrollment of Black students: 39% of all Black undergraduate college students in the United States attend a community college (American Association of Community College, 2023). As a result, a substantial number of Black women adult learners enroll at this post-secondary educational level, making the community college a notable pillar in their educational journey (NCES, 2023; Strayhorn & Johnson, 2014).

There are overall student success and academic achievement gaps between students of color and White college students. However, Black women's community college enrollment and program completion rates continue to outperform their Black male counterparts (Greene et al., 2008). Like other female adult learners, Black female adult learners invest significant energy in managing the multiple life responsibilities of family, employment, and their educational

demands. In addition to navigating this balancing act, enrollment status, finances, work conditions, and support systems can affect a student's educational experience (Ebanks & Francois, 2022; Henrikson, 2019; Mauney, 2020). Notwithstanding these notable challenges, various positive factors contribute to the success of Black female adult learners as they pursue their post-secondary educational goals. Factors that influence the success of Black female adult learners include cohort program models (Atwater & Holmes, 2016; Fedor, 2017), mentoring (Atwater & Holmes, 2016; Johnson et al., 2000; Tarule, 1988), and social support networks such as family, peer, and faculty (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Henry, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

Looking more closely, extensive existing research demonstrates that faculty play an integral role in student achievement, motivation, academic self-efficacy, and other student success outcomes (Beasley, 2021; Berhane et al., 2023; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Hund, 2020; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Pascarella et al., 1978). Positive interactions with community college faculty and adult female peers serve as crucial influential factors in the educational experience of adult women (Cox & Ebbers, 2010). Faculty have the opportunity to foster a culture of student success and provide support through meaningful interactions with students (Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Ebanks & Francois, 2022; Johnson et al., 2000). Previous studies demonstrate that Black female adult learners report a need to connect with others, including faculty and classmates. As a part of their success, it is necessary for these women to create a sense of belonging on their college campuses (Bonner et al., 2015; Mauney, 2020). Surprisingly, there is a paucity of empirical research focusing specifically on the experiences of Black female adult learners in community colleges, resulting in scant information concerning their needs related to interacting with faculty members.

Statement of the Problem

Interactions in the classroom environment and within learning spaces can foster or hinder women's personal and academic development. Inequities that are found in the larger society may also be found in the college classroom (Belenky et al., 1997). For instance, Hall and Sandler (1982) describe "chilly climate" as a classroom environment in which subtle and overt attitudes and behaviors perpetuate gender inequalities, thereby creating educational barriers for women and affirming negative stereotypes of women, disrupting the "educational process" for all students (p. 3).

Supporting this finding, Sax and colleagues (2005) reported negative experiences and interactions with faculty was associated with female students selecting more traditional female majors and career fields such as education. Women who felt their contributions and comments were not taken seriously by faculty described negative impacts on their math performance and educational ambitions (Sax et al., 2005). Past research reports that adult female students may have experiences with faculty not taking their educational pursuits seriously due to their delay in college enrollment or their return to the post-secondary educational setting (Hall & Sandler, 1982; Gammel et al., 2020). Part-time enrollment status as well as complex competing life responsibilities may also be viewed negatively by faculty, resulting in patronizing interactions, disparaging comments, and condescending responses (Hall & Sandler, 1982; Gammel et al., 2020). In a recent study, women were found to be less likely to have interactions with faculty that "centered academic and personal growth" and to be less likely than their male counterparts to work on research projects with faculty members (Cohen, 2018, p. 126). Taken together, the literature reveals gendered patterns and differences in faculty-student interactions. In addition to

gender, race and age can also play a significant role in how a student interacts and engages with faculty and other campus agents.

For women students of color, such as Black female learners, studies indicate that they experience the double burden of being both a member of a marginalized ethnic group and a woman, and that Black women continue to describe “chilly climates” in learning spaces and a lack of academic support which leaves them feeling isolated and invisible (Ebanks & Francois, 2022; Hall & Sandler, 1982). As adult learners, Black women enter these learning spaces with their race, gender, and adult learner status intertwined. Grappling with racialized and gendered challenges can be exhausting, which can leave Black female adult students reluctant to engage with faculty members, classmates, and other campus agents of another race or ethnic group (Allen et al., 2023). Researchers suggest college faculty, staff, and administrators can address this by gaining a better understanding of the unique needs of Black female adult learners and becoming intentional about initiating faculty interactions that affirm and support those needs (Allen et al., 2023; Booker, 2007; Rendón, 1994). With this in mind, the current case study addressed the gap in research by studying how Black female adult learners’ interactions with faculty shape their educational environment and experience.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative case study seeks to illuminate the voices of Black females by exploring their unique, lived experiences as adult learners enrolled at community colleges. The primary purpose of the study is to examine, from the perspective of Black female adult learners, their meaningful student interactions with community college faculty. The study focused on factors that are valuable and beneficial to the student experience and emphasize faculty-student interaction as something that positively influences the overall educational experience of Black

female adult learners. The secondary purpose of this study is to share empirical data with community college faculty, staff, and administrators in order to facilitate learning about intentional, student-centered interactions that Black female adult learners believe are meaningful to the learning environment and educational experience.

Significance of the Study

While it has been reported that Black female adult learners constitute a significant portion of the community college student population and generally there are factors that foster Black female student success in community colleges, what remains unclear is the nature of Black female adult learners' unique educational experiences. This study is significant because it will enhance our understanding of this important subgroup of learners' interactions with community college faculty in ways that meet their unique needs. Further, addressing this gap in the literature reinforces the value of exploring the experiences of Black female adult learners to provide further insight into how these relational interactions influence the learning environment (Winkle-Wagner, 2015).

Academic achievement can, in part, be predicted by faculty-student interactions and experiences. Faculty influence both academic self-concept and other self-efficacy beliefs as well as a student's academic performance (Cokley, 2003; Cole, 2010; Erck & Sriram, 2022; Vetter et al., 2019). Research has shown that faculty play a fundamental role in student success and influence a student's sense of belonging. Black students interact with faculty at a higher rate than White students yet report less satisfaction than White students (Hund, 2020; Rodgers & Summer, 2008). This research will offer the Black female adult learner's perspective on the significance and value of faculty relationships to their educational experience.

It is important to note that positionality and intersecting identities such as race and gender shape how learners make meaning, experience the learning environment, and interact with faculty (Bridwell, 2020; Duran & Jones, 2019; Sheard, 1994). The topic of intersecting racial and gender identities of adult learners is important to the fields of adult and higher education because marginalized groups have been historically silenced, thus creating an imbalanced or incomplete literature (Commodore et al., 2018; Porter & Byrd, 2021; Sheard, 1994). Discourse and research on race and gender have largely ignored Black women, thereby perpetuating this silence. The phrases "intersecting" or "multiple identities" have been interchangeably used with intersectionality. However, intersectionality, from an academic lens, is not simply addressing the intersecting identities of individuals. Founding theorist and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* in the late 1980s as an analytic concept that interrogates how systems of oppression and institutional structures fail women of color, specifically Black women, because of their intersecting identities (Harris & Patton, 2019; Haynes et al., 2020; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017; Southbank Centre, 2016). While this study does consider the multiple identities of the Black female adult learner and its influence on faculty-student interactions, this study is not theoretically based upon academic intersectionality research constructs or methodologies.

Community college administrators and faculty who are committed to student success and seek to utilize faculty-student interaction as a tool to enhance the educational experience of their students may find this study's findings valuable. Additionally, having a better understanding of Black female adult learners' educational experiences and the ways in which they interact with faculty they believe are meaningful to the learning environment presents the opportunity to inform faculty professional development. Learners who assume multiple identities, including adult female students of color, experience the educational space in unique ways as compared to

their traditional aged, White counterparts (Bonner et al., 2015; Mauney, 2020). Therefore, findings may also be useful to educational researchers seeking to explore the unique experiences of historically marginalized adult learners. To that end, this study's findings can provide empirical data on adult learners' experiences, adding breadth to the literature and to applied settings.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study to explore the educational experiences of Black female adult learners at community colleges:

1. How do Black female adult learners describe their meaningful interactions with community college faculty?
2. How do Black female adult learners describe the significance of faculty-student interactions?
    a. How do Black female adult learners describe the significance of other learning space interactions?

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study research design. Qualitative research focuses on the participant's perspectives and her lived experiences. Qualitative researchers seek to understand, which makes this methodological approach appropriate for exploring the educational experiences of Black female adult learners to gain a better understanding of their interactions with faculty members (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020). A descriptive, particularistic case study approach was utilized in the study. Multiple data sources were used to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam, 1998). Data were collected through two phases of semi-structured interviews and reflective journals to

explore students' perspectives on meaningful faculty interaction. The study used Miles and colleagues' (2020) three-dimensional approach to data analysis: data condensation; drawing and verifying conclusions; and data display. Interviews and journal entries were analyzed using a thematic analysis allowing emergent themes to be discussed (Fugard & Potts, 2019; Merriam, 1998; Miles et al., 2020). Chapter three provides detailed research design information that was used to carry out the case study.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

The purpose of the study is to explore how Black female adult learners perceive meaningful interactions with their community college faculty. Feminist education emphasizes using "content by, about, and for women" in the educational space. This makes Black Feminist Thought (BFT) the theoretical framework quintessential for exploring the experiences of Black women (Evans-Winter, 2019; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Black Feminist Thought seeks to empower Black women, emphasizes using one's voice, and validates Black women's experience as knowledge. In addition to knowledge validation, dialogue, safe spaces, ethic of care, ethic of accountability, and consciousness are key elements of BFT (Collins, 1989, 2000). Black Feminist Thought, explained in depth in chapter two, served as the guiding theoretical framework.

Conceptual Influences

While Black Feminist Thought serves as the primary framework guiding the study, there are other models and theories which conceptually influence the exploration of faculty interaction with Black female adult learners. These models and theories of adult learners or faculty-student interactions support this study yet are insufficient in considering the background and experiences of culturally diverse students or the complexity of the intertwined nature of Black female adult

learners' educational experiences (Kelly et al., 2021; Lundberg, 2010; Rendón, 1994; Tinto, 1993).

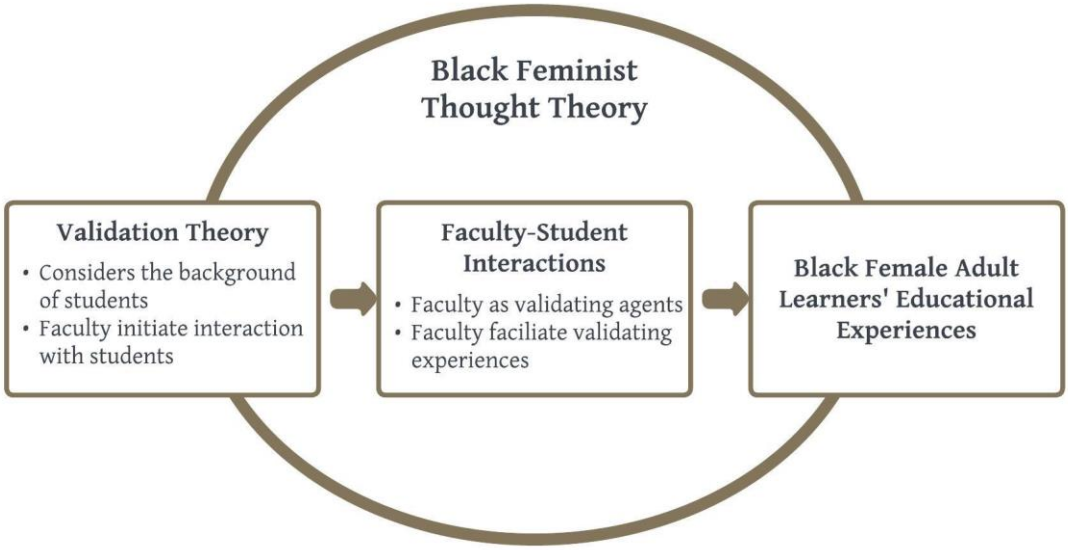
Rendón's (1994) validation theory builds upon Astin (1984) and Tinto's (1993) seminal work on student involvement and student integration into the college. Notably, validation theory emphasizes faculty initiating interactions with students and validating and affirming the experiences and knowledge of marginalized students (Rendón, 1994, 2002). Further, Barnett (2011) defines validation as a specific type of faculty-student interaction and suggests it can be utilized as a tool to foster student development and learning. Elements of validation theory provide a conceptual lens to explore faculty-student interaction that considers the unique experiences of Black female adult learners, validates their knowledge, and values their contributions to the learning space (Rendón, 1994, 2002). Additionally, concepts of adult learning theory that directly align with elements of Black Feminist Thought and validation theory, such as the notions that adult learners' previous experiences are valuable and adult learners have a need for autonomy in the learning environment (Knowles et al., 2015), are woven into the study.

Figure 1.1 provides a suggested conceptual model for examining faculty-student interactions with Black female adult learners using Collins' (1989, 2000) Black Feminist Thought and validating experiences as a type of faculty-student interaction as proposed by Rendón's (1994, 2002) validation theory. The box on the far left signifies validation theory which is an appropriate model to explore faculty-student interactions among Black female adult learners because it considers the cultural background of marginalized students. The arrow points from validation theory to faculty-student interaction to represent faculty facilitating validation practices in their interactions with students. The second arrow points from faculty-student

interactions to Black female adult learners, which represents the influence validating faculty can have on their overall experience. Black Feminist Thought serves as the overarching theoretical framework for these conceptual influences.

Figure 1.1

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework



Faculty as validating agents advances the purpose of Black Feminist Thought of empowerment by conceptually focusing on engaging, empowering, and educating Black female adult learners. “The validating classroom empowers students, connects faculty with students, and creates an atmosphere of trust, respect and freedom to learn” (Rendón, 1994, p. 47).

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study and to provide clarification, the following terms are defined:

Adult learner – a student who is 25 years of age or older, assumes other life roles and responsibilities, and is financially independent. Term is interchangeable with adult student (Horn & Carroll, 1996).

Black female – an individual who self-identifies as an American with African descent/ancestry and who self-identifies with the gender of woman associating with the social/cultural norms of being female. Term is interchangeably used with Black woman, African American female, and African American woman (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Community college – two-year, associate degree granting post-secondary educational institution that offers options to students such as "preparation for transfer to four-year college or university, workforce development and skills training, noncredit programs" (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2012; American Association of Community College, 2023).

Faculty-student interaction – engagement between faculty and student which can occur inside and outside the classroom. Term is interchangeably used with student-faculty interaction and faculty-student relationship (Lundberg, 2014).

Intersectionality – an analytic concept developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw to analyze how "structures make certain identities the consequence of the vehicle for vulnerability. It draws attention to how institutional structures play a role in the exclusion of women of color, particularly Black women" (Southbank Centre, 2016).

Validation – term used in validation theory as presented by Rendón; "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development" (Rendón, 1994).

Chapter Summary

In conclusion, this study seeks to amplify the voices of Black female adult learners by exploring their unique educational experiences. Despite Black women representing a large segment of the community college student body, little is known about their interactions with

faculty. This case study will enhance our understanding of faculty-student interactions and gain deeper insight into the significance of faculty relationships for Black female adult learners.

Chapter two provides a review of the literature discussing the experiences of Black female adult learners, achievements of Black women in higher education, faculty-student interaction, validation theory, and Black Feminist Thought. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how Black Feminist Thought and conceptual influences frame the study. Chapter three describes the study's methodological approach in detail. Characteristics of qualitative case study research are provided and reasons why this methodology is appropriate for this study are explained. Positionality, subjectivity, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures are also discussed. The chapter concludes with issues of rigor and study limitations and strengths. Chapter four provides study participant profiles and describes findings from the data. Chapter five discusses the study's findings and connections to the literature. Theoretical implications, recommendations, and a chapter summary are also provided.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature in this chapter describes and discusses the educational experiences of the Black female adult learner as she grapples with her intersecting identities of being Black, a woman, and an adult learner in relation to her faculty-student interactions. Classic seminal literature such as *Women's Ways of Knowing* and the identity development of Black college women are also discussed to provide insight on how women learners make meaning and the influence of this meaning on identity formation (Belenky et al., 1997). Within the literature review, I also intentionally build upon an emphasis of accomplishments and educational gains for Black women. In doing so, historical and recent achievements of Black women in higher education provide a foundation upon which to continue to build excellence and success. The review of literature describes pedagogical approaches and initiatives that foster success among Black female adult learners. A discussion of faculty-student interactions (FSI) and validating experiences derived from validation theory are presented in the review as empirically grounded key elements of student success and achievement. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of Black Feminist Thought as the central theoretical framework and explains the framework's utility in the exploration of Black female adult learners' interactions with faculty.

Black Female Adult Learners

"Education has long served as a powerful symbol for the important connections among self, change, and empowerment in African-American communities." – P. H. Collins, 2000

The Experiences of Black Female Adult Learners

While there is an existing body of literature on adult learners, and on female adult learners, there is a notable paucity of literature on Black female adult learners. To adequately serve Black female adult learners in the educational setting, college administrators, faculty, and

staff must have a better understanding of who she is and how she became who she is. How do these women experience the educational space?

Operational Experiences

An important aspect of the experiences of Black female adult learners is life roles and responsibilities. The literature on adult learners acknowledges that many female adult learners experience multiple roles and disproportionate household responsibilities while pursuing their educational goals (Thompson, 2013). Female adult students are not a monolithic group and experience their lives uniquely. However, they do share some life role commonalities. Many are employed full-time, have family commitments such as caring for children or other family members, attend college part-time, volunteer, and participate in other civic and community capacities (Fairchild, 2003). While both men and women adult learners must manage multiple life responsibilities, the balancing act of family, work, and school obligations has a strong likelihood to induce stress for women, since they often assume more domestic responsibilities than men (Johnson et al., 2000; Lin, 2016). While trying to balance home life and school life, some Black female adult learners struggle to maintain household responsibilities and find time to complete homework, take exams, and complete reading assignments.

An example of this is the visual narrative study carried out by Henriksen (2019) in which the Black female adult student who returned to college described the “all hands-on deck” support she received from both her husband and older, more independent children in the household. Despite struggling to balance life responsibilities, she received motivational support in addition to assistance with household duties. Prior to starting her educational pursuits, she had been accustomed to completing all the household tasks. When educational responsibilities limited her time, her family helped with preparing dinner, cleaning, and care of the family’s younger

children (Henriksen, 2019). Attempting to complete programs of study while maintaining life outside of their educational pursuits, some Black female adult learners have lessened their courseload to part-time status or withdrawn from college to later return, resulting in slower program progression and delays in program completion (Henriksen, 2019; Mauney, 2020).

With regard to program progression and persistence at the community college level, an issue of particular relevance is Black female adult learner's enrollment in developmental courses and the influence it has on their educational experience and desire to persist. Almost 50% of Black female students take developmental courses. This could be a result of delayed entry to the community college; Black women average a five and a half-year delay between high school graduation and starting their post-secondary educational pursuits (Bivens & Wood, 2016). Multiple developmental courses can influence a student's academic self-confidence and self-efficacy, which can in turn affect academic achievement and persistence (Bivens & Wood, 2016). This is evident in Roberts' (2018) dissertation study on African American female non-traditional students' perception of developmental courses, which found that the process for testing and enrollment was cumbersome and complicated. When asked about persistence, the women in the study explained that simply being placed into the developmental course did not discourage them from persisting. Findings suggest that it was inadequate advising with academic counselors, a lack of understanding of campus policies and procedures related to properly withdrawing from courses, and being labeled a "developmental student" that affected their academic self-confidence and desire to continue their educational pursuits (Roberts, 2018).

Many of the concerns voiced by the women in Roberts' study regarding developmental courses are directly related to interactions with college personnel. Black female adult learners want to feel supported on their educational journey. Faculty and staff play an important role on

this journey and authors suggest faculty should closely examine how they engage with students enrolled in these courses (Bivens & Wood, 2016; Roberts, 2018). Are proper course placement and accurate academic advisement a regular occurrence for Black female adult learners? Adequate and up-to-date, correct information in academic advising sessions are necessary components of enrollment and student support services. Are faculty engaging in classroom practices that affirm the student's abilities? Or are they creating spaces that damage a student's academic self-efficacy? With such a significant percentage of Black women enrolling in developmental courses, colleges need to make an effort to ensure these women are supported by proactively providing important college information such as enrollment/withdrawal procedures, well-informed academic advising sessions, and college personnel focused on student success (Roberts, 2018).

In addition to challenges associated with beginning college studies in developmental courses, it is important to consider the financial circumstances of Black female adult learners and how these circumstances influence their educational experience. A disproportionate percentage of Black community college students are classified as low-income, defined by the federally funded TRIO program as an individual earning $25,000 or less annually. Financial instability and financial strain are the results of lower incomes, wealth gaps, and insufficient federal financial aid assistance (Ebanks & Francois, 2022). Research reports that Black community college students owe more in college loans than their non-Black counterparts; Black women have the highest loan debts among college students (Ebanks & Francois, 2022). Study findings report Black female adult learners experience stress due to the financial strain of attending college. Some women were forced to withdraw from their courses but returned once they were able to afford the financial burden of tuition along with their other financial commitments

(Mauney, 2020). The literature reveals that Black female adult learners also struggle with racial battle fatigue, stereotype threat, housing insecurity, and transportation challenges (Bivens & Wood, 2016; Blevins, 2018, Corbin et al., 2018; Ebanks & Francois, 2022; Grayson, 2022; Neal-Jackson, 2020; Steele, 1997). It is important for faculty and other college personnel who may interact with Black female adult learners to understand the various burdens they carry. While community colleges can and do help alleviate some of these challenges, the way in which faculty interact with students while facing these issues is also important. Unanswered questions include, "Are faculty members aware of campus resources to refer students to who are experiencing difficult circumstances? Do faculty have the capacity in their roles to extend grace for students who miss class due to lack of transportation or lack of childcare?"

Relational Experiences

Overall, previous study findings support the existence and influence of compounding identities of race, gender, and age. This "triple jeopardy," an extension of Beale's (1970) "double jeopardy," can create challenging and unique experiences not found in other student populations (Bonner et al., 2015). Mauney (2020) described Black female non-traditional students as wives, daughters, prayerful mothers, and employees experiencing stress, anxiety, and financial challenges while receiving support and encouragement on their educational journey. Bonner and colleagues (2015) grappled with the complexities of intersecting racial and gendered identities in their work while integrating the nature of being a non-traditional student. Their research findings revealed Black women felt out of place on their college campus, leaving Black female non-traditional students feeling unwelcomed and unseen. These women described their desire yet reluctance to join campus groups due to the age differences between themselves and their younger counterparts. Yet at the same time, the Black female non-traditional students expressed

the need to build connections with others and a desire to increase their sense of belonging such as participating in Black campus organizations, Black sororities, or affiliations off campus (Bonner et al., 2015).

If Black female adult learners feel invisible and as if they do not belong on their college campuses, then how does isolation lead to involvement? Generally, university students are encouraged to become involved on their college campuses because involvement is linked to student development, persistence, and achievement (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993). However, Black female adult learners have described college campuses that do not value their presence as adults with competing demands. Students need to feel as though they belong on their campus. Students need to feel as though they matter. Students need to feel as though who they are as individuals is valued. This is especially true for students of color, namely Black female learners who have historically been pushed to the margins in education (Apugo, 2019; Merriweather Hunn, 2004; Porter & Byrd, 2021).

Despite the various challenges they face, studies indicate high motivation on the part of Black female non-traditional students to continue their educational pursuits. Increased job opportunities and the ability to provide for their families serve as motivating factors that influence their desire to persist (Mauney, 2020; Roberts 2018). Research also suggests the salience of the Black female non-traditional student's faith as a grounding means that helps them persevere through challenges as they matriculate. These women have described belief systems as giving them an intangible strength they cannot get elsewhere (Mauney, 2020). Generally, Black female adult learners are motivated to persist and accomplish their educational goals and aspirations. Interactions on college campuses and within learning spaces have the opportunity to build upon their desire to persist. These interactions can also promote student success.

Black female adult learners are a dynamic subgroup of learners who are navigating the terrains of higher education carrying the "triple burden" of being Black, female, and adult. How does being a woman shape the learning process? In what ways does being Black coupled with being an adult learner shape identity formation? The following section discusses how women make meaning and influences on the development of women's multiple identities.

Women's Ways of Knowing and Identity Development

Developing an understanding of Black female adult learners' experiences and how their unique experiences influence knowledge construction and identity formation provides the necessary landscape to analyze the appropriateness of institutional practices and pedagogical approaches to women's educational experiences (Belenky et al., 1997; Porter & Dean, 2015). Historically, White males were the key subjects used in student development research. This left women and marginalized women in the background and created a yawning gap in the literature on how Black female adult learners form their identities (Belenky et al., 1997; Porter, 2017). Seminal researchers such as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997), Tarule (1988), Taylor and Marienau (1995), and Hayes and Flannery (2000) have contributed research focused on women's ways of learning and women's development (Gammel et al., 2020).

Scholars theorize how education—access to or lack thereof—can influence how a woman sees herself and the world around her. Education can serve as the impetus for a shift in her ways of knowing and how she makes meaning (Belenky et al., 1997; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Taylor and Marienau (1995) cited the integration of literature from adult learning, adult development, and feminist pedagogy to advance the development of educational approaches that focused on adult female learners and how they develop. The key themes that emerged from the integration were women's experiences and women's development. Validation of women's experiences was

fundamental to new emerging pedagogical frameworks as researchers attempted to emphasize women's epistemic beliefs (Taylor & Marienau, 1995).

For many years, the primary research in women's identity and education rested upon the work of Belenky and colleagues (1997), who presented five epistemological perspectives describing women's ways of knowing: (1) silence, (2) received knower, (3) subjective knower, (4) procedural knower, and (5) constructed knower. Silence asserts that a woman denies her capability to be a knower and relies on external knowledge sources. Received knower refers to a woman receiving knowledge from others and viewing herself solely as a student who gains knowledge from authorized knowers. The subjective knower has found her inner voice and intuition serves as the source of her own knowledge. The procedural knower finds the voice of reason between her experiences and what is known through either a logical approach (separate knower) or an empathic approach (connected knower). Finally, the constructed knower integrates her own knowledge with that of other voices through reason and reflection (Belenky et al., 1997; Taylor & Marienau, 1995). This line of thinking adds value to the literature because it emphasizes that adult educators need to understand that all adult female learners will not enter the educational space as a constructed knower prepared to be self-directed, challenge knowledge and truth presented by other knowers, and accept their own experiences as validated knowledge. Educators who work with adult learners should create learning environments that support the development of self (Taylor & Marienau, 1995). While Belenky and others' research on women's development advanced the conversation of women's ways of knowing, Black scholars argued that much of this research is insufficient because it fails to specifically examine the development of Black female learners (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Porter, 2017).

The Black Female Adult Learner's Identity Development

Identity is defined as the "layered aspects of life that describes who one is in society, within a group and as a unique individual. Identity is fluid and does not represent a singular notion of who someone is" (Henriksen, 2019, p. 146). Current discourse on student identity development lacks a close examination of Black undergraduate women, how their identities are formed, and what factors affect identity formation (Banks-Wallace, 2000; Porter, 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015). Porter's (2017) empirical study focuses on the experiences of Black female college students, their intersecting identities, and how they articulate their identities. The data from the study revealed seven categorical themes that were used to construct the *Model of Identity Development in Black Undergraduate Women,* which features an eighth element that was indirectly included but not explicitly stated. The model includes the following components: "intersectionality of identities, personal foundations, precollegiate socialization, collegiate socialization, interactions with others, influence of media, and influence of role modeling" (Porter, 2017; Porter et al., 2020, p. 254).

The model presents a unique and necessary tool to analyze the identity development of Black college women. Critical assumptions of the model are: (1) complex, intersecting identities of Black women are inextricably connected and cannot be discussed separately, (2) interactions with others and environmental factors influence how Black women develop and express their identities, and (3) Black women enact resistance to racialized and gendered oppressions and stereotypical images by assuming multiple consciousnesses. Identity development of the Black woman is a continuous process of becoming that does not end upon entering adulthood, which demonstrates the need to assess if the model is applicable to adult Black women who are not the traditional college age (Porter, 2017; Porter et al., 2020).

Porter's model does not consider the adult learner as an intersecting identity for Black college women (Porter, 2017). However, it is important to explore what factors influence how the Black woman develops her identity as a learner at this stage of her life. Porter's model emphasizes the experiences prior to college as a significant factor in how the Black college woman sees herself. Typically, the Black female adult learner will have life experiences that differ from those of the traditional 18- or 19-year-old student entering college immediately after high school. How do these experiences shape her identity formation as she adds student identity to the layered aspects of her life?

Socialization prior to college was an integral element in the model. Study participants all used the term *strong* to describe Black women from experiences throughout their lives. A key finding revealed that Black women are socialized to be strong. Stories were shared by Black women that demonstrated the strength of Black women in their families, their churches, and in educational settings (Porter, 2017). Additionally, Grayson (2022) discussed the potential harmful effects of terms such as "*Strong Black Woman"* and the expectation to constantly exude strength and resilience in the face of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression. Distress and racial battle fatigue can result when Black women try to uphold the depiction of being strong (Grayson, 2022). However, viewing *Strong Black Woman* as a positive attribute, the Black college students in Porter's (2017) study saw themselves as strong and defined Black womanhood as strong.

In addition, it is important to consider how the portrayal of Black women in media, negative stereotypes of Black women, and others' expectations of how Black women should behave influence the way Black undergraduate female students view themselves. The women in Porter's study discussed how damaging and degrading such expectations and negative images

can be and the need to counteract negative media influences through meaningful interactions on their college campuses that affirm what it means to be a Black woman. Once on her college campus, accessibility to collegiate support organizations and other support networks as well as interactions other Black college women affected how her identity developed as a student, a Black female student (Porter, 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015). Studies at universities and four-year colleges present more opportunities and conditions that facilitate out-of-classroom engagement in comparison to community college environments. Thus, community colleges, in particular, can benefit from an awareness of the developmental needs of this subgroup of students and the use of strategies that focus on the learning space where most engagement happens. In short, faculty can provide meaningful interactions that positively influence student development.

Familial influence is the most salient influential factor in the identity development of Black undergraduate women. The values and strength they witnessed in their mothers and families significantly influenced their identity formation prior to attending college. How the Black female student expressed her racial identity is also influenced by family upbringing (Porter, 2017; Porter & Dean, 2015; Porter et al., 2020). Findings from research support this view and assert that despite interactions with communal groups, such as other adult learners in classes or colleagues in the workplace, for many female adult students who are also spouses, mothers, or caretakers, their familial identity is most important (Henriksen, 2019).

Black female adult learners enter educational spaces with previous experiences that can include support and encouragement (or lack of) to pursue their educational goals, workplace issues or challenges, societal expectations to maintain the *Strong Black Woman* image perpetuated in media, and negative stereotypes related to their academic capabilities (Grayson, 2022; Porter et al., 2020). These unique experiences, interactions, and perspectives ultimately

have influenced how identities are developed, what identities are developed, and how identities are articulated. Finding her voice and articulating how she sees herself, integrating her personal experiences and the knowledge of others while using reason to ascertain the truth by connecting knowledge, and her position as a learner amongst faculty and peers in the educational space are critical aspects of the development of the Black undergraduate woman (Porter et al., 2020; Tarule, 1988). Having a better understanding of the experiences of Black women and how those experiences influence who she is as a learner will allow faculty and staff to foster a learning environment that promotes student success.

Success of the Black Female Adult Learner

"For women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered." – A. Lorde, 2007

Much of the research concerned with challenges and barriers of Black students examines Black female learners through a deficit lens. However, the purpose of this study is to explore faculty interactions Black female adult learners believe are meaningful to their educational experience by illuminating their voices and sharing their stories. The achievements and contributions of Black women within higher education are also discussed to demonstrate academic excellence and serve as the impetus to continue building a legacy of excellence.

Over the decades, Black women continue to excel academically. In the late 1970s only 9.2% of Black women attained an associate degree. Since then, Black women's program completion rate has steadily increased. In 2020, 13.2% of all women earning an associate degree at the two-year/community college level were Black. In general, women graduate with associate degrees at higher rates than men. In 2020, approximately 625,000 associate degrees were conferred on women, compared to 393,079 for men. Black women also lead women of color in

the number of masters and doctoral degrees conferred (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a). Black women are highly concentrated in business and psychology degree fields and have the most bachelor's degrees conferred in health science and other health related programs compared to other women of color. While there is a need to increase the representation of minoritized women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, the fifth highest number of bachelor's degrees attained by Black women were in biological and biomedical sciences. Black female learners are also highly represented in the social sciences, human services, and social work degree fields (Carnevale et al., 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

The Black female adult learner's presence in education is undeniable as she continues to enter colleges at high numbers, outnumbers her Black male counterpart in attaining all levels of degrees, and succeeds in her post-baccalaureate educational pursuits (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). These accomplishments are continuing along the path created by the many Black women who were pioneers in education.

Black Women in Higher Education

The Trailblazers

Oberlin College in Ohio was not only instrumental in educating women during the 1830s but also opened its doors to Black men and women to access post-secondary education. Ms. Lucy Ann Stanton graduated from Oberlin College in 1850 with a certificate in literature, paving the way for the first graduate with a baccalaureate degree. Making history, Mary Jane Patterson became the first Black women to earn a bachelor's degree in the United States when she graduated from Oberlin College in 1862. Ms. Patterson did not conform to the common two-year program typically taken by female students at Oberlin. She refused to be limited and took a

"gentleman's course of study" alongside White male students in classical language and mathematics courses. The honors graduate was passionate about her own education and the education of other Black people. Upon leaving Oberlin College, Mary Jane Patterson became an educator and served students for several years (Blakemore, 2017; Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2023).

From college student to college faculty, Black women blazed the trails. Sarah Jane Woodson Early, a graduate of Oberlin College, is credited with being the first Black female college professor. She was hired at Wilberforce College in 1858 and was a Black educator pioneer. Her advocacy for and commitment to educating Black people was evident during a speech she gave at the 1863 Colored Teachers Association meeting. Her speech encouraged Black youth to seek post-secondary education and develop leadership skills to advance the Black race (Boyd, 2019). North Carolina is home to one of the only two all-women historically Black colleges and universities, Bennett College. Located in Greensboro, North Carolina, Bennett holds the honor of appointing the first Black female college president, Dr. Willa Player. President Player earned her PhD at Columbia University in 1948 and became the country's first Black female president of a fully accredited liberal arts college in 1955. Her educational career included teacher, director of admissions, dean, vice president and ultimately president of Bennett College (Bennett College, 2023; University of North Carolina at Greensboro Library Archives, 1977).

Prior to college presidency, the role of Dean of Women was instrumental in the progression of women in higher education. This role was the first administrator position appointed to women at coeducational colleges. Many women in this position also served as faculty in academic disciplines in addition to their responsibilities as dean. In this role, women

advocated for, supported, and guided female students and served as the voice for both female faculty and female students. Deans of Women demonstrated to the female student body the professional advancement available to women (Parker, 2015).

Most notably, Lucy Diggs Slowe served not only as one of the founders of the first Black Greek lettered organization for college women, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, but as the first professionally trained Black Dean of Women. Ms. Slowe was hired in 1922 at Howard University and significantly contributed to the advancement of Black women in higher education. Her approach to her position as Dean of Women integrated both the interests of Black students and Black women college employees. She advocated for the development of Black college women through leadership opportunities. Self-determination and self-governance were topics of regular discussion during her tenure (Perkins, 1996). She felt it was critical for Black college women to acquire leadership skills that would prepare them for the "modern" world. Her deanship consisted of career guidance that emphasized expanding female students' career aspirations beyond the teaching profession. Slowe was responsible for developing a Dean of Women's program which included a physician and dietitian that specifically served the female student population. She also emphasized the purpose of residential dormitories should be to cultivate "community, fellowship, leadership, and independence" (Perkins, 1996, p. 92). In 1931, Slowe was successful at creating a "female campus" at Howard University with the building of three women's dormitories which provided a holistic approach to not only housing but educating Black college women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2022; Perkins, 1996; Slowe, 1933).

During her deanship, she made changes to residence hall student committees by focusing on policymaking, student governance, and autonomy with a name change to "House Government Association." A mentoring program was also established that shifted the campus culture of

utilizing chaperons to developing trained mentors. Ms. Slowe provided summer reading assignments and workshops to prepare upcoming senior students to serve as role models, campus guides, and a support system for freshman female students as they transitioned to college life (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2022; Perkins, 1996).

Dean Slowe also founded two organizations that were devoted to the progression of Black women in higher education. The National Association of College Women (NACW) was founded in 1923 and focused on developing Black women college graduates from accredited colleges and universities in leadership, improving campus facilities, and enhancing the college curriculum at Black post-secondary institutions. As president of NACW, Dean Slowe focused on establishing standards for Black women in higher education. The organization was data driven and conducted several studies relating to the experiences of Black college women and Black faculty, curricular offerings, the presence of student organizations, and college policies and regulatory practices (Perkins, 1990, 1996). It was Lucy Diggs Slowe's goal to have professionally trained Deans of Women and other student personnel on the campuses of Black colleges and universities. The National Association of College Women was an opportunity to advance scholarship for Black women by raising the standards of Black colleges and also improving the working conditions for Black women (Perkins, 1990).

In 1929, Lucy Diggs Slowe established a student affairs organization, the National Association of Women's Deans and Advisors of Colored Schools. This group of advisors and deans employed at Black colleges and universities focused on providing each other support systems while they navigated issues such as campus housing, women personnel, college administrators, and career advancement (Perkins, 1996).

Despite experiencing resistance during her tenure at Howard University under President Mordecai Johnson, Lucy Diggs Slowe became a leader among both Black and White Deans of Women and advanced the profession of student personnel in higher education. Many Deans of Women and others sought her expertise and guidance when addressing issues on their campuses (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2022; Perkins, 1996).

As previously stated, Black women have been depicted negatively in media and subjected to negative stereotypes of who they are expected to be (Grayson, 2022; Porter & Byrd, 2021; Robinson et al., 2013; Steele, 1997). However, history has proven that the Black woman in higher education has been successful as a student, faculty, administrator, and college president. College faculty and other personnel who may engage with Black female adult learners can be equipped with positive images and triumphs of Black women to impart a standard of success and dispel negative stereotypes of Black women in education.

The Excluded to The Exceptional

From exclusion in higher education to now surpassing men in both enrollment and academic achievement, Black women continue to lead the academic pathway in obtaining post-secondary education. For the 2021-2022 academic year, Black women surpassed Black men in associate, bachelor, master, and doctorate degrees conferred (Berg, 2020; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Statistics demonstrate Black women's notable presence in higher education, yet research on the Black woman in higher education that focuses on her experience and success is surprisingly scarce.

In contrast, Black faculty trends have seen minimal growth. In fall 2020, male and female Black faculty only represented 5.6% of all professors, assistant professors, associate professors, lecturers, instructors, and other faculty (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b).

American Council on Education's (n.d., citing NCES, 2016) report of race and ethnicity in higher education provided context for Black faculty representation in the varying post-secondary education settings. At the two-year/community college level, Black men and women comprise approximately 7.4% of the faculty population, while only representing 5.1% of public four-year university faculty (American Council on Education, n.d.). The community college enrolls almost 40% of all Black undergraduate college students in the United States, yet more effort is needed increase the presence of Black faculty and improve faculty diversity on community college campuses (American Association of Community College, 2023; Cross & Carman, 2021).

Although few in number, Black women faculty continue to display excellence and make exceptional strides in higher education. For example, the recent appointment of Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles as the first Black female chair of North Carolina State University's Educational Leadership, Policy, and Human Development department highlights the advancement of Black women in higher education. Dr. Gayles brings a wealth of professional experience to the position, having served as a champion for diversity, equity, and inclusion, being an Alumni Distinguished Graduate Professor, and recognized by *DIVERSE: Issues in Higher Education* magazine as one of 25 women leading in higher education (North Carolina State University, 2023). Only a short drive from North Carolina State University, Dr. Geleana Alston recently became the first full professor of Adult Education at North Carolina A & T State University in Greensboro, North Carolina. Dr. Alston's promotion represents a significant accomplishment for Black women faculty, as less than 2% of all full professors in the U.S. are Black women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b).

Black women are also making advances within the community college system nationwide. The North Carolina Community College System is highlighted, as currently there are

three Black women serving as community college presidents. Dr. Pamela Senegal is leading Piedmont Community College as the college serves students in the northern part of North Carolina. Dr. Senegal and the college leadership value continuous improvement through the 2021-2031 strategic plan focusing on learning, completion, transfer, economic development and partnerships, and institutional culture (Senegal et al., 2021; Piedmont Community College, 2022). The April 2022 Trailblazer Profile by Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research highlighted Dr. Murray Jean Williams, president of Roanoke-Chowan Community College. Dr. Williams values finding your voice, inclusive practices, and always putting the student first. She stated, "I don't see this as a job, I see it as a calling" (Williams et al., 2022, p. 5). The most recent appointment of a Black female community college president in North Carolina was Dr. Patrena Benton Elliott. She began serving as president of Halifax Community College January 2023. Dr. Elliott came to the presidential role with several years of professional experience working with the University of North Carolina System and at Robeson Community College. She has been successful at raising millions of dollars in educational funding and developing academic programming. Dr. Pamela Senegal, Dr. Murray Williams, and Dr. Patrena Elliott exemplify excellence as they lead their respective college campuses (Halifax Community College, 2023). The community college remains an educational setting where a Black women can progress from student to college president when given the tools to be successful.

Fostering Success Among Black Female Adult Learners

As Walpole and colleagues remind us, "successful African American women may be silent wheels, who, if not supported, may fall off the wagon before indicators of academic or other challenges are signaled" (Walpole et al., 2014, p. 171). As the Black female learner exhibits increased enrollment numbers and program completion rates, an examination of factors

that foster her success is necessary in the discourse of female learners in higher and adult education.

Success at the Community College

Many students appreciate the community college setting as a place to obtain an education in hopes of employment, social mobility, and increased economic capital. Earning a credential or degree has the potential to increase the likelihood of employment; nearly 85% of those who have earned a credential or degree are employed (Bivens & Wood, 2016; Ebanks & Francois, 2022). Community colleges have an opportunity to provide Black female adult learners with equitable education that results in employment with livable wages and produce skilled employees for the workforce. However, Black women who do not have higher education are more likely to experience unemployment, lack access to higher income wages, and lack access to the quality care often associated with employer health benefits. Educating Black female students and supporting them in their educational pursuits results in skilled employees equipped to enter the labor force and is a benefit to society at large (Bivens & Wood, 2016; Ebanks & Francois, 2022; Leggard et al., 2022).

Community College Initiatives and Best Practices

Economic mobility for people of color has been impacted by systemic barriers. The community college can address this issue through strategic initiatives focused on adult students of color. Lumina Foundation partnered with major stakeholders to implement the Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Education (REACH) program across the United States in six states: California, Texas, Virginia, New York, Colorado, and North Carolina. Over 150 community colleges were impacted by the program, including 24 in North Carolina. REACH sought to create pathways to earn high value, non-degree credentials and improve employment

opportunities for adults. The program's goal was to increase the credential attainment for adult learners of color (Black, Latinx, and Indigenous) by two percent in a two-year timeframe (2021-2023). The non-degree credential was integrated into an associate degree program, giving students the opportunity to further their education upon receiving the credential. A critical component of the program was supportive services that created a network focused on the success of adult learners aged 25 years and older (North Carolina Community College System, 2021; Taliaferro, 2021).

The REACH project is significant because there are racial disparities present in educational attainment. Black, Latinx, and Indigenous racial groups have lower educational attainment rates than their White counterparts. North Carolina REACH completed a needs assessment at each community college and used data to determine training and support needs essential to developing credential pathways that would meet the needs of their respective geographical region and adult learner population. The project concluded May 2023 and will undergo a program evaluation to determine its effectiveness (North Carolina Community College System, 2021; Taliaferro, 2021).

Additionally, Atwater and Holmes (2016) offer proven best practices utilized by Hillsborough Community College in Florida to increase the retention and persistence rates of Black students. "Four pillars of Academic Achievement are (1) create a campus culture of academic achievement, (2) understand cultural/racial differences among students, (3) introduce students to new experiences and opportunities, and (4) provide sufficient mentoring opportunities and resources" (Atwater & Holmes, 2016, p. 47). Use of affirming language with Black students that communicates high expectations and their ability to achieve academically, use of intrusive academic advising and follow-up, and acknowledgement of unique challenges faced by Black

students through tailored support programs and services are strategies employed by the college to create a campus culture that fosters academic achievement. The remaining pillars are attained through a combination of developing a college diversity council consisting of students, faculty, staff, and leadership aiming to develop relatable campus programming and seminars; financial advising and additional financial support; and collaborative learning through shared cultural activities and educational experiences (Atwater & Holmes, 2016).

In the best practices model, Atwater and Holmes (2016) also propose community colleges go beyond intrusive advising and intentional communicative practices by developing intrusive programs such as cohort activities which can foster a campus culture that promotes academic achievement. Similarly, Fedor (2017) makes the case for using cohort models to influence learning, leadership development, and personal development of adult female college students. Cohort models of learning are an instructional method in which students are grouped together upon enrollment based on a particular curriculum program and progress through the program in a lock-step path together. They were developed to accommodate the lives of adult students and create a learning environment that promotes being a part of a group dynamic (Fedor, 2017). Cohorts create a learning community for students, facilitating a communicative learning space that emphasizes collaborative peer support (Belenky et al., 1997; Fedor, 2017; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Fedor (2017) reported cohort models provided a space to increase adult women's academic confidence and self-efficacy beliefs; furthermore, due to the communicative nature of cohorts, women are able to enhance communication skills and develop as a leader, skills that can also be applied in the workplace.

It would be useful to explore whether Black female adult learners' academic developmental needs are met by this collaborative approach to the learning process. While cohort

models have been found to influence student development, how might campus climate, peer and faculty relationships, specific program-cohort alignment, and other institutional and personal factors play a role in the level of value cohorts bring to the educational experiences of Black female adult learners?

Support Networks

Another important aspect of fostering success among Black female adult learners is supportive relationships. Previous studies of female adult learners have suggested utilizing peer advisors or mentors to provide network support systems for adult female students who share commonalities and can assist new students with becoming acclimated on campus and to the new role of adult learner (Johnson et al., 2000; Tarule, 1988). However, Bahr and colleagues (2021) argue that adult learners may not be likely to participate in peer mentoring programs with their younger counterparts and are more likely to have closer interactions with faculty members. Best practices for increasing persistence among Black community college students see value in both peer and faculty mentors. Peers may be more accessible to other students than community college faculty or staff and can offer personalized support and guidance based on their experience as an adult female student (Atwater & Holmes, 2016; Johnson et al., 2000).

Mentoring and support networks for Black college women has taken on the form of Sister/Sista Circles which have been facilitated at four-year colleges and universities with both Black female students and Black female faculty. The circles are spaces in which Black women provide support for each other, discuss challenges faced on their college campuses, consider resolutions to address issues, highlight successes and achievements, and dialogue about relevant topics related to being a Black woman. Sister Circles provide a forum for women to authentically explore their experiences and connect with other Black women on their campuses (Henry, 2013;

Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Winkle-Wagner's (2009) qualitative research study utilized a Sister Circle as a data collection method; it served as a focus group for Black undergraduate college women to converse about their experiences with racial issues within a supportive group setting. In addition to traditional mentoring programs, community college faculty and student services could implement Sister Circles to foster support networks among Black female learners that value their unique experiences and promote self-definition and empowerment (Henry, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Winkle-Wagner et al, 2019).

Taken together, the literature has shown that specialized initiatives, intrusive cohorts and advising sessions, mentoring programs, and Sister Circles are supportive measures that can contribute to the success of Black college women. Community colleges have an opportunity to provide a learning environment in which students can feel affirmed, valued, and supported through concerted efforts. Are faculty members serving as mentors and offering academic and career guidance to Black female adult learners? Are there spaces and opportunities for Black female adult learners to engage with each other and faculty members about their experiences? How are community colleges actively contributing to the success of Black female adult learners beyond the previously discussed approaches?

In addition to campus initiatives and support networks, it is important for community colleges seeking to increase a sense of belongingness, enhance the educational experience, and improve the persistence rates of Black students to implement culturally relevant curriculum and create a culturally responsive campus culture which is supported and enforced by college leadership (Atwater & Holmes, 2016; Fedor, 2017, Winkle-Wagner, 2009; Leggard et al, 2022).

Culturally Relevant Curriculum in Adult Learning

The purpose of Culturally Relevant Curriculum (CRC) in adult education seeks to empower learners from marginalized groups to see the "need, importance and possibility of their own freedom" (Guy, 1999a, p. 94). Two of the common themes discussed in the literature are learner transformation and empowerment. Culturally relevant adult education emphasizes a positive learner image and the adult learner's ability to change or improve their circumstances supported by faculty, staff, and fellow peers. CRC also seeks to empower learners to challenge the dominant narrative and affirm the power marginalized adult learners possess (Brookfield, 2013). Community college student bodies include learners aged 25 years and older and a large percentage of students of color. It is essential for faculty to create educational spaces that acknowledge, value, and integrate these racialized, gendered, generational differences into teaching and learning practices (Guy, 1999a; Sealy-Ruiz, 2007).

Adult educators must examine educational practices, classroom norms, student expectations, communicative practices, coursework evaluation processes, and other aspects of the teaching and learning environment to determine if the current practices perpetuate the marginalization of learners and reproduce educational inequities. Guy (1999b) draws on the work of Marchisani and Adams (1992) and offers a culturally relevant learning environment model: (1) instructor's cultural self-awareness, (2) learner's culture, (3) inclusive curriculum, and (4) instructional methods and processes. Getting to know the learner is important for adult educators to create educational experiences that connect the learner's cultural background to learning. Adult educators utilizing CRC develop curriculum and learning environment processes that encompass learners' diverse cultural identities, facilitate adult learner involvement, and equalize power dynamics between educator and learner (Guy, 1999b).

Supporting this view, adult education scholar Merriweather Hunn (2004) writes that adult educators must commit to challenging the dominant, Eurocentric educational practices and frameworks that reinforce pushing Black learners to the margins. Adult educators should develop a conversational teaching style, which is an interactive method that gives learners the opportunity to dialogically engage with the learning process and integrate their personal experiences into the process. Validating the cultural differences found among a diverse group of adult learners through educational materials selection, classroom activities, and connecting the learning process to community interests is essential to inclusive practices for adult educators (Merriweather Hunn, 2004; Sheared, 1994).

To further examine the use Culturally Relevant Curriculum in the classroom, Sealy-Ruiz (2007) conducted a qualitative study with Black female adult learners enrolled in a freshman composition course at a New York liberal arts college. She identifies three major themes: language validation, positive self and group identity, and self-affirmation or goal affirmation. Utilizing CRC validated the use of Black English in conjunction with Standard English for participants. Students were authorized to use their everyday language in the academic setting, thereby validating their unique way of writing and speaking which ultimately improved their abilities in and commitment to writing. The culturally relevant reading assignments provided opportunities for the Black female adult learners to learn more about Black history and identify with positive images of Black womanhood. As students were introduced to a variety of speeches, articles, books, and essays which resonated with their Blackness, they were able to self-reflect and affirm who they were as Black women and who they desired to become (Sealy-Ruiz, 2007).

Sealy-Ruiz's (2007) research was framed by Black Feminist Thought theory. Utilizing this theoretical lens, Culturally Relevant Curriculum provided a space for Black female adult

learners to use their lived experiences as ways of knowing, engage with each other to assess and validate their knowledge, and demonstrate care and accountability among one another. College and university faculty have the opportunity to develop and use relevant curriculum that engages, empowers, and educates not only Black adult female learners but all learners. Sealy-Ruiz concludes “Using a CRC is a critical first step in creating a classroom that includes all voices” (Sealy-Ruiz, 2007, p. 58).

Culturally Relevant Curriculum emphasizes the value of experience. Similarly, seminal adult education scholar Edward Lindeman asserted that adult learners are motivated to learn when it is meaningful and many adult learners have a life-centered learning orientation that values learning experiences that are applicable to real-life problems (Knowles et al., 2015). Discourse on adult learners emphasizes establishing a learning environment that integrates mutual respect, collaboration, support, and openness as necessary elements in adult learning. Adult students should also be seen as co-creators with faculty in the planning process. An educational space that promotes dialogue and learner input is critical to move beyond the “banking education” learning environment to one that is more inclusive of the adult learner’s individual experiences and emphasizes development (Apps, 1973; Newton, 2003; Ross-Gordon, 2003; Ross-Gordon et al., 2016). Adult students are shaped by their environment and experiences—hence the importance of college faculty, staff, and leadership having a better understanding of factors shaping female adult learners’ learning process to inform pedagogical approaches used in the classroom (Apps, 1973; Belenky et al., 1997; Newton, 2003; Rose et al., 2024).

Feminist Pedagogy

Institutional culture and curricula can influence a woman's learning by either enhancing her educational experience or hindering it. In most cases, women have access to higher education, yet the educational space maintains patriarchal norms that shape pedagogical practices (Allen et al., 2008; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). Feminist pedagogy provides an approach to education that can be utilized to promote success among female adult learners.

Feminist education emerged from the women's movement in the 1950s into the 1960s. As women were seeking social justice outside of the academy, female educators also echoed the necessity to develop classrooms that validated women as knowers and creators of knowledge. Feminist pedagogy emphasizes challenging the dominant narrative and values one's own experience as knowledge (Allen et al., 2008).

Feminist pedagogy differs from traditional approaches in its use of students' unique, lived experiences as the foundation to co-construct knowledge collaboratively with students. Faculty do not assume the role of authoritarian in the learning environment but seek to validate the students' experiences as knowledge. Applying a feminist epistemological framework to the educational experience not only benefits female students but cultivates a learning environment that promotes success for all students (Allen et al., 2008; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). In addition to faculty's inclusive pedagogical practices in the classroom and utilization of cohort models to foster collaborative learning, interactions with faculty can also greatly influence and promote success among students (Fedor, 2007; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Kuh & Hu, 2001).

Faculty-Student Interaction

"The educational context created by faculty behaviors and attitudes has a dramatic effect on student learning and engagement." – P. Umbach & M. Wawrzynski, 2005

Faculty-student interaction (also referred to as student-faculty interaction or relationship; FSI) can be described as contact faculty engage in with students inside and outside of class; these experiences can be formal or informal (Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Trolian et al., 2016). Research on faculty-student interaction has established that students' personal and academic development, learning outcomes, levels of college satisfaction, and other student success measures can be influenced by the type and quality of interactions students have with faculty (Kim & Sax, 2017; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella et al., 1978). In their seminal publication *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,* Chickering and Gamson (1987) reported the criticality of encouraging contact between students and faculty and found faculty-student interaction to be one of the most significant factors in student motivation and student involvement (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). This significance serves as the impetus to focus on student interactions with faculty as a key success factor for Black female adult learners in the current study.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) also emphasized frequency of faculty interactions with students. This view is supported by Umbach and Wawrzynski's (2005) findings that both first year students in their second semester and senior students experienced gains in personal development and increased general education knowledge when there were frequent course-related interactions with faculty members. In contrast, other research suggests frequency of faculty interactions do not predict learning outcomes. Lundberg and Schreiner's (2004) research on how quality and frequency of faculty-student interactions predict cognitive outcomes found that the quality of interactions significantly predicted learning for all racial/ethnic groups in their study. Several scholars have maintained the importance of both the nature of faculty-student interaction and frequency. Repeated and frequent interactions with students that do not meet their needs are not beneficial to their educational experience (Cole, 2008; Lundberg & Schreiner,

2004; Parker et al., 2022). This is consistent with the data obtained by Trolian and colleagues (2016), who noted that while both frequency and quality were positively associated with student academic motivation, quality of faculty-student interaction was found to be the most salient factor influencing the motivation of students.

In addition to academic motivation, student interactions with faculty can influence academic self-concept and other non-academic outcomes. A recent study examining the effects of faculty-student interaction on academic self-concept defined self-concept as the views and beliefs one holds about him or herself which are influenced by experiences and interactions with others. The same holds true for academic self-concept (Parker et al., 2022). Findings point out that the way in which an individual views oneself in "academic achievement situations" is also contingent upon interactions with others such as faculty, student peers, and other individuals with whom a student could engage (p. 2295). Consistent with the literature, Parker and colleagues (2022) emphasized the importance of faculty and peer interaction in a student's educational experience.

Together these studies provide important insight into the significance of the quality of faculty interactions as a major factor in student success and how faculty-student interaction can influence affective outcomes such as motivation, academic self-confidence, and other student success measures. Colleges need to consider the nature of faculty interactions with marginalized student groups, such as Black female adult learners. What types of interactions are common between faculty members and marginalized students? How do those interactions differ if the student is also an adult learner?

What is known about faculty-student interaction is largely based on research at four-year colleges/universities and research to date has been dominated by quantitative approaches.

However, in their analysis of how faculty relationships can affect students experiencing challenges, Guzzardo and colleagues (2021) used both quantitative data and detailed interview data which provided a nuanced understanding of the relationship between student and faculty. Their longitudinal study found that consistent communication between faculty and students and faculty's willingness to work with students facing various challenges positively influenced the educational experiences for many students. These practices resulted in students feeling supported (Guzzardo et al., 2021). A notable finding showed the positive impact faculty interactions can have when interactions reaffirm diverse student perspectives, foster sense of belongingness, and communicate students' capability to achieve academically. Students reported faculty who were passionate about student success and challenged students with rigorous yet manageable work contributed meaningfully to their college experience and achievement. Lastly, students expressed the desire for faculty to provide additional support, such as career advice and academic advising. Faculty are asked to do more than simply teach. Students need mentors, emotional support, career guidance, out-of-class opportunities to address academic concerns, and opportunities to enhance learning in the field through experiential experiences (Guzzardo et al., 2021).

Types of Faculty-Student Interaction

As previously stated, faculty-student interactions can be formal or informal and occur both in and out of class. In the 1970s, seminal researchers Pascarella and Terenzini presented six key faculty roles which described faculty contact as cited by Cole (2010): "(1) academic or course information, (2) discuss career concerns, (3) resolve a personal problem, (4) discuss intellectual matters, (5) discuss campus issue, and (6) socialize informally" (p. 7).

The roles of faculty and types of interactions faculty have with students have expanded over the years. In his analysis of faculty-student interaction, Cole (2010) identified various types

of faculty interactions with students. General interactions include asking for course information from faculty, seeking advice from faculty, and discussing coursework with faculty. Academic related interactions are asking for course feedback from faculty on exams, projects, or other assignments. Personal interactions with faculty include time socializing with faculty, discussing personal issues with faculty, asking about and discussing career aspirations or guidance with faculty, and engaging in research projects with faculty.

Faculty-student interactions can also include requesting/writing recommendation letters, discussion about critical topics, academic advising, and informal social activities. There is a consensus among researchers that formal and informal interactions with faculty positively influence persistence, motivation, and a wide variety of other student success outcomes (Astin, 1984; Kim & Sax, 2017; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Parker et al., 2022; Pascarella et al., 1978; Tinto, 1993).

Benefits of Faculty-Student Interaction

Several studies have indicated that interacting with faculty positively influences student success outcomes. In an investigation into the patterns of faculty-student interactions and its impact on student development and learning, study findings reported: (1) faculty-student interactions increase as students matriculate through their educational program, (2) students' satisfaction levels are indirectly influenced by faculty-student interactions, (3) effort exerted by students to engage in other types of interactions is mediated by faculty-student interaction, and (4) the effects of faculty-student interactions are varying and depend upon contextual factors (Kuh & Hu, 2001).

To further illustrate the influence of faculty-student interaction, Parker and colleagues (2022) identified non-academic and psychosocial benefits of faculty interacting with students. In

their review, they suggested that students gain connectedness, “institutional acceptance,” a desire to pursue graduate studies, and higher levels of satisfaction with the institution and faculty members through interacting with faculty. Through FSI students can also gain an interest in diversity, political, and social issues and enhance their civic attitudes (Parker et al., 2022). A useful summary of the benefits of faculty-student interaction that emerged from the literature was reported by Kim and Sax (2017). General effects of FSI include outcomes such as academic achievement, persistence, and cognitive, vocational, affective, civic, and spiritual outcomes. Matriculation, a sense of belonging, and classroom engagement are said to be indirectly affected by faculty-student interaction, while cognitive development is directly and indirectly affected by FSI. Reciprocal effects include grade point average, racial tolerance, and other experiences such as peer engagement (Kim & Sax, 2017).

Recognizing that student success outcomes of Black female adult learners can potentially be influenced by quality interactions with faculty, it is important for community college leaders to have an awareness of the magnitude of success measures that can be affected by interacting with faculty. Are faculty aware of the various aspects of a student’s experience they can influence? Are there specific outcomes that faculty have more influence on with Black female adult learners? The current literature does not provide a definitive answer to this question. However, affective outcomes such as a sense of belonging and feeling seen and valued have been noted in the literature as important for Black college students’ educational experience (Booker, 2007; Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021; Kelly et al., 2021).

Seminal Research on Faculty-Student Interaction

Student development and persistence theories and models from prominent scholars have been utilized in studies related to faculty-student interactions for decades. Astin’s (1984) theory

of involvement is one of the commonly used models of college impact used to examine faculty-student interaction. The theory asserts that the most instrumental type of involvement is faculty-student interaction which can impact student success measures such as personal and student cognitive development, academic achievement, persistence, satisfaction with the college experience, and career trajectories.

Secondly, Tinto's (1993) model of student departure examines persistence and argues that faculty-student interaction is a key factor in college integration which can affect academic achievement and other student outcomes. Tinto's model was adapted by Bean and Metzner (1985) in their seminal work examining persistence and student success factors that impact attrition for adult learners. To date, their conceptual model is the only framework for studying variables contributing to adult learners' intention to continue their educational pursuits (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kachur, 2020). Bean and Metzner's (1985) model asserts that nontraditional students, who are often non-residential and enrolled part-time, have fewer interactions with faculty members resulting in less socialization with the college campus.

Another commonly used model, Pascarella's (1985) general model for assessing change, posits that student characteristics, institutional climate, and institutional characteristics influence faculty-student interactions which are both directly and indirectly associated with student development and the learning process through student's level of effort. Lastly, Weidman's (1989) model of undergraduate socialization suggests students enter the college environment with values, perceptions, and attitudes that are influenced by socialization with peers and faculty (Kim & Sax, 2017). The evidence of socialization can be clearly seen in Chang's (2005) findings, which revealed that students enter community college with a disposition of faculty interaction based on prior knowledge of persons in an authoritative position. Younger students

may associate faculty interactions with previous interactions with teachers in secondary education while adult learners may associate faculty with supervisors in the work environment. Once on campus, the student's disposition can either be "reinforced or revised" depending on the college campus climate or the classroom climate (Chang, 2005, p. 774).

A major drawback of traditional college persistence and student success models as well as theories used to explore faculty-student interactions is that they do not consider the experiences of underserved and marginalized student populations (Rendón, 2002; Swanson & Cole, 2022). Although Tinto's theory of student departure is widely used when examining persistence of college students, researchers have criticized its lack of cultural sensitivity. His theory does not consider the importance of family, friends, teachers, etc. once a student is on campus. Tinto discussed students' pre-college factors but failed to connect the support systems from the student's home and community to the educational experience once the student has begun to matriculate (Guiffrida, 2006).

This view is supported by Lundberg (2010), who writes that Tinto and Astin's models fail to consider students of color and their unique experiences that influence their involvement on campus. Lundberg (2010) also discusses Rendón's theory of validation, which puts the onus of initiating and encouraging involvement on the faculty and staff. Rendón's theory emphasizes the educational institution's responsibility in validating students and fostering a campus culture that invites students to become involved (Lundberg, 2010; Rendón, 1994).

Validation Theory

The theory of validation is in direct contrast to yet builds upon the theories presented by Tinto and Astin, which both emphasize the student's responsibility to integrate into the college environment through involvement (Rendón, 1994, 2002). As mentioned in the previous chapter,

Black Feminist Thought is the primary theoretical framework for this study. However, validation theory conceptually influences this study because it emphasizes the need to validate underserved and underrepresented students who may need additional academic and personal support to facilitate campus involvement. Validation theory takes into consideration that all students may not possess the wherewithal to become involved on their college campus and engage with faculty and peers (Kim & Sax, 2017; Lundberg, 2010; Rendón, 1994, 2002).

The numerous types of faculty-student interactions previously mentioned demonstrate the wide variety of ways faculty interact with students. However, validating experiences are most relevant to this case study due to validation theory's emphasis on the importance of faculty validating and affirming the experiences, knowledge, and contributions of marginalized students. The above review of the literature revealed a trend among scholars studying Black college students. Many utilized validation theory in their exploration of faculty-student interactions or discussed the importance of faculty's use of validation when interacting with Black students and other students of color (Cole, 2010; Kelly et al., 2021; Lundberg, 2010, 2014; Vetter et al., 2019). Thus, utilizing validation as a concept through which to examine meaningful faculty-student interaction among Black female adult learners is appropriate for this study.

Rendón's validation concept consists of six elements. Firstly, it sites faculty and college staff as the initiators of student engagement and interaction. Secondly, validation is a process that occurs over the duration of a student's college career. The third element emphasizes various validation agents such as faculty, family, peers, friends, etc. that can influence a student's academic and personal development. Furthermore, validation can facilitate students' self-worth and promote students' feelings of being capable of achievement. The fifth element discusses the need for validation to happen early in a student's college career. Finally, validation theory

maintains that academic and interpersonal validation are necessary for student development (Rendón, 1994, 2002).

Validating experiences can occur both inside and outside of the classroom. In-class validation can involve faculty and peers. Faculty validate students by exhibiting genuine care, being approachable, providing constructive feedback, treating students fairly, maintaining a personable and welcoming disposition, and creating a classroom environment which promotes students' capacity to learn. Peers also provide other students with support and encouragement within the classroom space (Rendón, 1994). While faculty and peers can also serve as out-of-class validation agents, most validating experiences outside the classroom involve students' family, friends, and home support systems. Out-of-class validation is just as significant as validation experienced in the actual learning environment. Validating agents are also necessary in personal and social development as students transition into college, matriculate through their educational program, and transition into the workforce (Rendón, 1994).

In her qualitative investigation of how in- and out-of-class experiences influence student development, Rendón (1994) found that the most salient experience for the study participants were interactions with individuals who provided support and validated their educational experience. These validating experiences occurred both inside and outside the classroom from faculty, family, student peers, and friends. Being validated as possessing the ability to learn and academically achieve was a vital part of the student's college transition (Rendón, 1994). Moreover, the importance of faculty utilizing learning theories that attend to various student populations such as women and students of color that emphasize these subgroups of students as knowers and acknowledge their ways of knowing is also discussed in the literature on academic validation (Rendón, 2002).

More recently a study examined the relationship between academic validation, frequency and quality of faculty-student interactions, students' sense of mattering, and student cumulative grade point average (GPA). Swanson and Cole (2022), like Lundberg, maintained that while frequency of faculty-student interactions is important, the quality and nature of the interactions must also be considered. Study findings revealed the frequency of interactions with faculty was not significantly associated to students' academic achievement in their third year. However, frequency of faculty interactions and feeling validated by faculty were both significantly associated with students' feelings of mattering to campus. This outcome reemphasizes the importance of the validating nature of faculty experiences in addition to the number of FSI occurrences. Another notable finding points out interactions with high school teachers and college faculty in the first year are significantly associated with students' GPA in their first year of college. This is consistent with Rendón's (1994) notion that validating experiences need to transpire early in a student's educational career. Thus, "In a validation model, institutional agents, not students, are expected to take the first step to not only promote involvement but to affirm students as knowers and valuable members of the college learning community" (Rendón, 2002, p. 645). Collectively, these studies outline the important role faculty play at universities and community colleges.

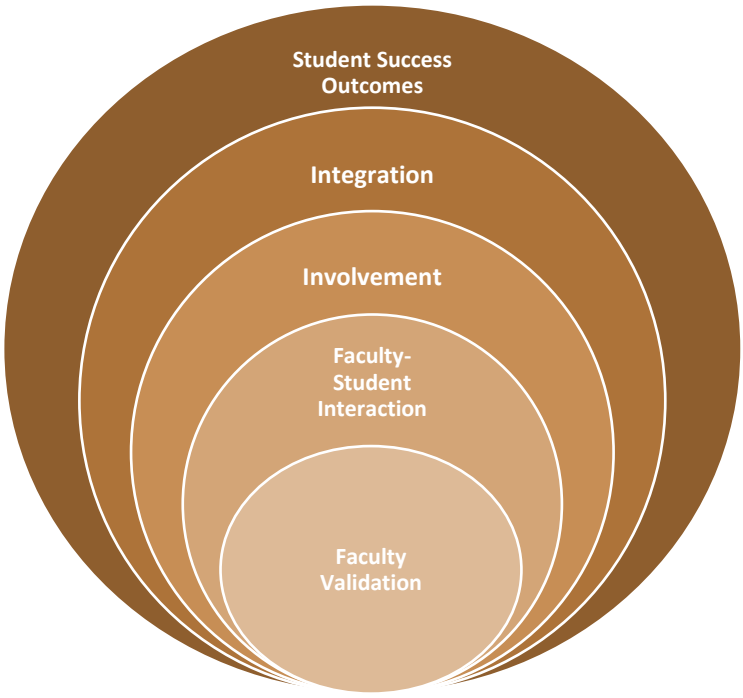
Validation Theory at the Community College

Little attention has been paid to community college student experience with an emphasis on in-class interactions related to student validation. It is important to note that many community college students limit their campus experience to attending class and infrequently engage with other types of campus involvement outside of class time (Barnett, 2011).

A quantitative study by Barnett (2011) suggests Rendón's (1994) validation construct is a type of faculty-student interaction which serves to increase student involvement and can be utilized as a tool to facilitate a student's integration into the college, thereby influencing student development, learning, and persistence. This view is supported by and builds upon the seminal researcher Tinto (1993), who describes faculty-student interaction as a form of college campus involvement. In the same vein, Austin (1984) asserts that involvement can impact student development and student learning. Tinto (1993) further suggests that to become integrated into their college environment, students must become involved to some degree. Figure 2.1 shows the relationship between faculty validation (Barnett, 2011; Rendón, 1994), involvement (Astin, 1984), integration (Tinto, 1993), and student success outcomes such as student development, learning, and student persistence according to Barnett (Astin, 1984; Barnett, 2011; Chang, 2005; Tinto, 1993).

Figure 2.1

Relationship Between Faculty Validation and Student Success Outcomes



Barnett (2011) found that faculty validation of community college students was a significantly strong predictor of academic integration and indirectly influenced students' intent to persist. Subconstructs of faculty validation emerged from the findings and include "students known and valued, caring instruction, appreciation for diversity, and mentoring" (p. 212). While the overall construct of faculty validation demonstrated a strong relationship with students' academic integration, *caring instruction* was the strongest predictor among the four faculty validation subconstructs presented above. In addition, *students known and valued* and *mentoring* subconstructs of faculty validation were significant predictors of community college students' intention to persist. This establishes that showing care and valuing students as unique individuals in the learning environment are needed as validating classroom practices (Barnett, 2011).

Barnett's (2011) study findings are important to better understand factors that directly influence student integration. In her analysis of validation experiences, she suggests institutions may increase student persistence through concerted efforts of increased faculty validation practices. Community college faculty can facilitate learning environments that value students' personal histories and incorporate them into course assignments and activities. Colleges can provide professional development that emphasizes the importance of faculty validation and various ways to validate students. Community college faculty are campus agents who typically have the most contact with students. It is critical to maximize the interactions faculty have with students by incorporating validation into faculty members' role and responsibilities (Barnett, 2011). Likewise, Levin and colleagues (2010) argue that community college faculty are a "core element to student development and attainment" (p. 54). Validating students' capacity to learn and achieve academically is a vital role faculty play in the educational development of students (Rendón, 2002).

Barnett's (2011) study reemphasized the importance of validating experiences while specifically exploring faculty-student interaction at the community college. However, the study failed to consider how race, gender, and age can shape the way community college students interact with faculty. For the female adult student with limited time on campus, how can faculty exhibit care and create a learning environment in which the student feels valued? An in-depth exploration into the educational experiences of female students of color who are also adult learners would provide a nuanced understanding of the relationship between Black female adult learners and community college faculty.

Faculty-Student Interaction and Female Adult Learners

Like Rendón, Wyatt (2011) emphasized the importance of colleges and universities being committed to supporting, facilitating, fostering, and initiating student engagement. Her study suggested non-traditional students assess their decision to engage with the institution based on how it will benefit them and typically do not view college involvement as a priority in their educational experience (Wyatt, 2011). Many female adult learners—who are part-time students, have work commitments, or potentially have additional family responsibilities as compared to their male counterparts before or after class—may only interact with the college during designated class times. Enrollment status and balancing other life roles can influence a female adult learner's availability to interact with faculty members (Chang, 2005; Wirt & Jaeger 2014). This view is supported by Parnes and colleagues (2020), who found enrollment status has a significant influence on faculty-student relationships. Part-time students reported less support from faculty relationships, indirectly affecting academic achievement.

Despite part-time enrollment status and other life responsibilities commonly associated with female adult learners, surprisingly, the literature suggested adult learners are more likely to

interact with faculty at higher levels than their younger counterparts (Chang, 2005). Further, female students are reported to have more interactions with faculty and have more meaningful interactions than male students (Hagedorn et al., 2000; Parker et al., 2022; Sax et al., 2005). Hagedorn and colleagues (2000) illustrated this point clearly. They reported that female students found it easy to develop relationships with faculty, discussed career related topics with faculty more than male students, and had higher levels of satisfaction with their interactions with faculty members (Hagedorn et al., 2000).

According to Parker and colleagues (2022), females have differing gains than men in that their interactions with faculty positively influence their emotional and academic well-being. One notable finding in the literature suggested an association between female students challenging faculty members and less attitudes regarding traditional gender roles, increased critical thinking skills and competitiveness for female students. However, challenging faculty predicted higher levels of stress and feelings of overwhelm for female students than their male counterparts (Sax et al., 2005).

To gain insight on how both female and male students perceive the learning environment, faculty should include classroom climate questions on course evaluations to assess Hall and Sandler's (1982) concept of "chilly climate" previously mentioned. If necessary, classroom adjustments should be made to ensure faculty members foster a class and campus culture in which all students feel valued, respected, and appreciated (Hall & Sandler, 1982). Faculty must become aware of their own gender biases and how they influence teaching practices and behaviors. Being cognizant of classroom dynamics, such as how often faculty engage female students, types of questions asked based on gender, use of language and terminology related to

gender roles, interruption patterns, etc. is essential for creating a warm climate for women (Hall & Sandler, 1982).

Further research reported that female non-traditional students desire opportunities to engage with other mature students in activities tailored to their needs and interests (Wyatt, 2011). As many non-traditional students only come to campus during class time, creating a campus environment and educational and leisure spaces that attract students to remain on campus may improve student engagement for female adult learners. Additionally, faculty must have a clear understanding of the female non-traditional student's epistemic beliefs and view her life experiences as a valuable contributor to the learning process. Lastly, connecting the female non-traditional student's life to newly acquired knowledge helps facilitate her engagement with the educational experience (Wyatt, 2011).

To increase their cognitive, personal, and social development, female non-traditional students need faculty and other campus agents to actively initiate interactions and facilitate engaging programs and activities (Rendón, 1994). It is necessary for faculty desiring to increase interaction with female adult students to take advantage of classroom experiences to engage in meaningful interactions (Chang, 2005; Wirt & Jaeger 2014). Do these interactions look different for Black female adult learners as compared to their other female counterparts? In what ways do the intersecting identities of race, gender, and age influence interactions with faculty members? Although research has been carried out on faculty-student interaction and Black college students, there is relatively little research focusing specifically on Black female adult learners and their interaction with community college faculty.

Faculty-Student Interactions and Black Learners

It has been observed that Black students' experiences with faculty and peers positively influences educational outcomes. Research suggests that academic and social engagement, defined as behaviors resulting in involvement with the "academic aspects and members of the campus community" at a student's college or university, are linked to stronger faculty and peer relationships and academic achievement among Black students (Beasley, 2021, p. 240).

Classroom participation, which refers to "active engagement in the life and activities of a class such as volunteering, asking questions, and assisting other students," has been associated with sense of belonging for Black college students (Booker, 2007, p. 179). The literature suggests that students who actively participate in class are likely to have higher levels of motivation and achieve academically. Thus, feeling as though one is a valuable member of the class community and actively participating in class activities is critical to the educational experiences of Black students (Booker, 2007).

Another prevalent theme that emerged from research findings was that students perceived the classroom as community when faculty members exhibited care and respect (Booker, 2007). Faculty members who are approachable, open, and respectful provide learning spaces in which Black students feel valued and supported. Further, classrooms that fostered feelings of trust and comfort increased students' sense of belongingness. In Booker's (2007) study, a faculty member's instructional style significantly influenced study participants' perception of classroom belongingness. Black students expressed the need for more relational and collaborative instructional practices. Faculty interactions, characteristics, and teaching approaches greatly influence classroom dynamics, sense of belonging, and perceptions of community. Faculty play

an integral part in creating learning environments that demonstrate care, respect, and a commitment to student success (Booker, 2007).

Supporting this view, Beasley (2021) reported three important predictors of Black college student engagement: (1) caring and respectful faculty relationships, (2) cultural fit into campus environment, and (3) strong racial identity. These factors greatly influenced the levels of academic and social engagement for Black students attending predominately White institutions (PWIs). Black students who felt their cultural perspectives were valued by their institution, their contributions were affirmed and respected, and that the institutions fostered a supportive campus climate were more engaged academically and socially. Surprisingly, findings established that a respectful faculty-student relationship was not a significant predictor of academic and social engagement. Demonstrating care was the key predictor. Furthermore, Cokley and colleagues' (2023) recent study found that when Black students experience student-faculty interactions that exhibit care, they are more likely to value their educational experiences.

Cokley and colleagues' (2023) study findings are consistent with prior research as a recurring theme found in the literature discussing Black college students and their relationships with faculty involve care, respect, and support (Beasley, 2021; Booker, 2007). Are faculty committed to exhibiting care to students? Are faculty committed to giving students respect? Are faculty committed to providing students with needed support? While one could assume these factors are automatically a part of the learning experience, many Black female students express feeling unsupported, unseen, and unvalued on their college campuses (Kelly et al., 2021; Parker & Trolian, 2020). These less than desirable circumstances lead one to ponder: what is the true nature of the relationship between Black female students and faculty members?

As explained previously, the frequency of faculty-student interactions as compared to the quality of the interactions has been a topic of discussion in the literature. Lundberg (2010) reported that for students of color, faculty characteristics such as approachability and helpfulness were more salient than frequency of faculty interactions, as frequency was not a predictor of student learning outcomes. This finding is significant to the exploration of faculty interaction among Black college students because, while the number of FSI may play a role in the success of Black students, the nature of those interactions plays a more significant role for this subgroup of learners (Beasley, 2021).

Another important aspect of faculty-student interaction and its influence on student outcomes for Black students is faculty criticism. Research has demonstrated that critique of a student's work can be detrimental to academic self-confidence and academic achievement, especially for underrepresented students. Students of color may have to grapple with racial stereotypes and microaggressions challenging their intellectual abilities. Negative feedback from faculty can exacerbate these issues, negatively affecting the student's motivation and academic self-efficacy and indirectly influencing their academic achievement (Cole, 2008). However, Flowers (2004) found that African American college students experienced gains when they asked their instructor for criticism and feedback about work and discussed ideas about class assignments with faculty members.

Further research revealed that GPA and level of educational satisfaction of African American students was influenced by constructive criticism (Cole, 2008). While negative or non-specific faculty feedback is of detriment to Black college students, faculty support and encouragement was positively associated with educational satisfaction. Supportive faculty and serving as a tutor to another college student were positive indicators for African American

students' academic achievement. Feedback from faculty, such as critiquing a student's work, providing strategies for improvement, or describing the quality of work can be a challenge as faculty try to balance positive and negative criticism (Cole, 2008). When interacting with students of color, it is imperative to supplement constructive feedback with supportive practices that encourage academic achievement (Cole, 2008; Flowers, 2004).

Much of the research on faculty-student interaction acknowledges its influence on academic self-confidence, intellectual development, learning, persistence, and overall student success. However, many studies on faculty-student interactions are based on traditional aged students at the four-year university. This study seeks to explore faculty-student interaction with Black female adult learners at the community college. The examination of the educational experiences of Black women necessitates utilizing a theory that considers the intersecting identities of being both Black and female. The following section establishes the framework for amplifying the voice of the Black female adult learner and exploring meaningful faculty interactions.

Black Feminist Thought Theoretical Framework

"Because clarifying Black women's experiences and ideas lies at the core of Black feminist thought, interpreting them requires collaborative leadership among those who participate in the diverse forms that Black women's communities now take." – P. Collins, 2000

This study embodies a feminist standpoint in that it positions women—Black women—at the center of analysis. Simply put, in this study, Black female adult learners are valued; their voices and experiences are valued. Their sheer existence is valued. The dehumanization and silencing of the Black woman have long been a part of American history and the lack of research on this population reaffirms the importance of illuminating their voices (Banks-Wallace, 2000;

Evans-Winters, 2019; Sheard, 1994). Black Feminist Thought serves as the theoretical framework to explore the experiences of Black female adult learners. BFT was developed by Black women and when investigating issues and topics related to Black women and girls, provides a theoretical lens that considers intersecting identities of race, gender, and class while regarding Black women and girls as dynamic and not a monolithic group (Collins, 1989; Evans-Winters, 2019; Porter, 2017).

While Patricia Hill Collins is credited with being the "mother" of Black Feminist Thought, several Black feminists paved the way for the work of her and fellow contemporary theorists such as bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw. Sojourner Truth was a trailblazing feminist who was instrumental during the Abolitionist Movement and who rallied for women's rights. Truth's famous speech "Ar'nt I a Woman" cemented her role in the beginnings of Black feminism as she spoke her truth about the invisibility of being not only a woman but a Black woman. In the early 1900s, Mary Church Terrell was also fighting for women's rights. She asserted that Black women needed to be uplifted for the betterment of all Black people (Schiller, 2000; Taylor, 1998). These women among others were the forerunners of Black Feminist Thought as a theory to approach issues related to Black women and girls.

This theoretical framework seeks justice for Black women and other oppressed people of color. In an effort to maintain control, dominant groups suppress the knowledge of the oppressed. Black women have been historically oppressed by labor exploitation, perpetuation of the "outsider within" status, denial of their basic rights and privileges, and the portrayal of negative images. The main objectives of this critical social theory are empowerment and resistance. Self-definition and using one's own voice to develop one's own agenda is critical for empowerment. Empowerment then leads to resisting and challenging oppression (Collins, 2000).

Elements of Black Feminist Thought

The major elements of Black Feminist Thought are knowledge validation, dialogue, ethic of care, ethic of accountability, safe spaces, and consciousness. Table 2.1 provides a summary of the theoretical framework elements.

Table 2.1

Elements of Black Feminist Thought

Elements	Brief Description
Knowledge Validation	Valuing knowledge derived from experience; Black feminist epistemology
Dialogue	Dialectical interactions used to assess knowledge; Black women's voice
Ethic of Care	Considers individual uniqueness, emotion, and empathy
Ethic of Accountability	Considers morals and charges the individual Black woman with the responsibility for validation
Safe Spaces	Havens that foster connectedness and validation through dialogue
Consciousness	Empowerment through self-definition; mind shift in safe spaces

Adapted from P. Collins, 1989

Researchers have various interpretations of Black Feminist Thought and emphasize various concepts of the theory. However, for this case study knowledge validation, dialogue, voice, and safe spaces are the most relevant elements for the exploration of Black female adult learners and faculty interaction. In addition to the core elements, the theoretical framework maintains a humanist vision aimed at coalition building and collaboration, which are necessary to address social justice issues such as educational inequities. The following paragraphs provide detail for each theory element relevant to the study (Collins, 1989, 2000).

The knowledge validation process is White male dominated. This positivist epistemology does not align with Black women's criteria. Black Feminist Thought subscribes to an Afrocentric

or Black feminist epistemology which emphasizes shared values related to culture, community, family dynamics, religion, and spirituality for people of African descent. The Afrocentric culture and feminist consciousness of the Black woman leads to a Black feminist epistemology that examines being Black and female coupled with multiple realities and multiple consciousnesses. Black feminist epistemology asserts that "Black women come to know through lived experiences, through an intersectional lens and by dialoguing with other Black women" (Collins, 1989; Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Porter et al., 2020, p. 257).

Discourse with others is used as a method to assess knowledge. Dialogue is an interactive experience by all group members where knowledge and ways of knowing are validated. It emphasizes connectedness, which impacts ways of knowing. The concrete lived experiences of Black women constitute meaning. Sharing experiences with others allows for connections to be formed. Dialectical, social exchanges illuminate the dichotomy between "knowing is seeing," which is associated with traditional epistemology, and "speaking and listening," which aligns with feminist epistemology. Finding voice is an overarching theme within Black Feminist Thought. This voice is used to express the "collective, self-defined Black women's standpoint." These collectives and sisterhoods are social settings where experiences are shared with other Black women (Banks-Wallace, 2000, p. 36; Bridwell, 2020; Collins, 1989, 2000).

Black Feminist Thought seeks to create safe spaces. A common safe space is Black women's relationships with each other. Mother-daughter relationships, mother-like kinships, sisters, aunts, friends, church settings, and organizational relationships result in conversations and dialectical connectedness that allows meaning making, the unique lived experiences, and the humanness of Black women to be validated. Dialectical and relational safe spaces are criticized as being exclusionary; however, how can Black women resist oppressive, dominant ideology

without collective dialogue? The end goal of Black Feminist Thought remains unchanged as Black women seek social justice and to be humanized in this racialized society. Safe spaces foster self-definition, knowledge validation, and resistance (Collins, 2000; Porter, 2017).

Black Feminist Thought has been used in multiple research studies to explore the lives of Black college women. Closely aligned with the current study, research included socialization and its influence on identity development of Black women (Porter et al., 2020); experiences of Black female non-traditional students at a Hispanic-serving institution (Bonner et al., 2015); presence of and challenges faced by African American women at PWIs (Apugo, 2019); and Black female students' experiences in a White male dominated engineering program (Stitt & Happel-Parkins, 2019). Utilization of Black Feminist Thought provided the necessary framework to address the research questions guiding the study in the exploration of how Black female adult learners describe meaningful interactions with community college faculty and how their intersecting identities influence the way in which an adult learner chooses to interact with community college faculty.

Discussion

"I have to be that familiar face

That feeling of connection and support.

I have to be her safe place." – E. Malloy, 2022

All the various support networks accessible to students serve their respective purposes. However, faculty members can serve as a distinct network of potential support, guidance, and assistance for academic and personal development. Faculty can provide experiences other support networks like family, friends, peers, and even student support offices cannot offer. Faculty are in a unique position and have the opportunity to engage and interact with students in

a different manner (Townsend & Twombly, 2007). Typically, at the community college, faculty have professional/field expertise and resources and can offer students intellectual and social capital that may not be available from other individuals on campus (Cohen & Brawer, 2013; Doran, 2021). Faculty must consider the role their interactions play in the educational experiences of Black female adult learners.

Research has shown that faculty interactions, such as validating experiences, have positively influenced student success outcomes for Black college women (Allen et al., 2023; Kelly et al., 2021). Integrating the Black Feminist Thought theoretical framework and validation theory provides a useful lens to examine faculty interaction with Black female adult learners (Collins, 1989, 2000; Rendón, 1994, 2002). Validating faculty interactions can engage, empower, and ultimately educate the Black female adult learner through creating educational spaces that affirm her experience as knowledge, encourage finding her voice, and support using her voice as she traverses on her educational journey into the workplace (Allen et al., 2023; Booker, 2007; Collins, 1989; Rendón, 1994).

Chapter Summary

In conclusion, the literature has shown that although Black college women are ever present and successful in higher education, they are understudied. Studies reviewed identified various factors influencing the success of Black college women. Community college initiatives, support networks, and Culturally Relevant Curriculum have been integral aspects of Black female adult learner's educational experience. Faculty-student interactions were discussed in detail as a key factor in student success and achievement. Black Feminist Thought was presented as the appropriate theoretical framework to examine Black college women, with validation theory serving as a conceptual influence emphasizing the need for faculty validation. The review

points to the need for further exploration of the educational experiences of Black female adult learners at the community college. Thus, the current study seeks to advance adult learner and higher education research by exploring understudied Black women, who remain a significant segment of the student population in post-secondary institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The following chapter outlines the methodology that was utilized to examine faculty-student interaction among Black female adult learners.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research seeks to understand. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) write that "qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (p. 6). This study sought to understand the experiences of Black female adult learners and their interactions with faculty members using a qualitative case study design.

The research questions that guided this case study in the examination of faculty interactions among Black female adult learners were:

1. How do Black female adult learners describe their meaningful interactions with community college faculty?
2. How do Black female adult learners describe the significance of faculty-student interactions?
    a. How do Black female adult learners describe the significance of other learning space interactions?

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research provides rich, descriptive data that "focuses on lived experiences, placed in its context" (Tracy, 2020, p. 7). Creswell and Poth (2018) present several characteristics of qualitative research. The researcher serves as the key instrument, collecting data in a natural setting, analyzing, and reporting out study findings. Qualitative research uses inductive-deductive logic reasoning processes allowing for an emergent, iterative process. Ultimately, qualitative researchers develop a holistic, contextual view of the problem or issue being studied. Focusing on participants' perspectives and how they make meaning allows

experience to serve as a source of empirical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Qualitative research has been defined as "utilizing interpretive paradigms or frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). Therefore, researchers work to become aware of, analyze, and make transparent any philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks that will inform and guide the research. For example, assumptions may be: (1) ontological, relating to reality; (2) epistemological, relating to knowledge; (3) axiological, relating to values; and (4) methodological, relating to the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Researchers who employ qualitative research methods often assume an epistemological stance that acknowledges there are multiple realities and perspectives. Qualitative researchers' epistemological assumption asserts that "knowledge is known–through the subjective experiences of people" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21). As a constructivist qualitative researcher, I believe an individual's perspective dictates one's truth and assume a Black feminist epistemological stance. This assumption demonstrates the appropriate utilization of Black Feminist Thought as the theoretical framework for this study because it affirms that Black women's lived experiences constitute knowledge (Collins, 1989, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In particular, qualitative research is an appropriate paradigm when the researcher intends to explore a problem or issue from the perspective of the study participant, taking into account a situational context, with the ultimate goal of gaining a substantive understanding of a given situation from the perspective of individuals within the environmental context or situation. Qualitative research can be quite powerful in providing a nuanced description, understanding, or

analysis of processes, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors of participants in a specific situation or context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018).

Black Feminist Thought was selected as the theoretical framework for the exploration of Black female adult learners and faculty interactions because it centers the experiences of Black women and one of its main purposes is empowerment. Qualitative researchers want to empower individuals to share their stories. This study gave Black female adult learners a space to amplify their voices and stories and contribute to empirical research. Thus, the use of Black Feminist Thought theoretical framework within qualitative research serves as an appropriate form of inquiry because both "want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 45; Evans-Winters, 2019).

Case Study Research

According to Creswell and Poth (2018) case study research is defined as "a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case themes" (p. 97). Case study is an appropriate method in answering "how" and "why" questions. Additionally, case study research often utilizes conceptual frameworks which illustrate who is included in the study, explore possible relationships between constructs, and place constructs into "intellectual bins." Relationships between constructs are determined once the data have been analyzed and are displayed in the final conceptual framework (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 1998). For the current study, the "case" or unit of analysis is the faculty-student interactions of Black female

adult learners which are perceived as meaningful. The case is bound within the context of the community college setting and adult learner attributes.

As a beginning point, I chose to focus on case study research from the perspectives of three highly regarded methodologists, Yin, Stake, and Merriam. Their philosophical and epistemological viewpoints influence their individual perspective to approaching the research process (Yazan, 2015). Some scholars have described Yin as a constructivist; however, much of his case study methodology elements emphasize objectivity and lack a distinction between qualitative and quantitative case study, resulting in other scholars associating him with a positivistic viewpoint (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yazan, 2015). In contrast, Stake and Merriam assume a constructivist viewpoint and believe that truth is determined by an individual's experiences and "knowledge is constructed" (Stake, 1995, p. 108; Yazan, 2015).

While Yin, Stake, and Merriam define "case" and "case study" uniquely, there is a consensus among the three that there is an inseparable link between the phenomenon (the "case") being studied and the context in which the phenomenon is situated. Yin's perspective emphasizes case studies are most useful in program evaluation while Stake's approach suggests case studies are more appropriate when researching programs and people. Merriam expands Yin and Stake's perspective and suggests case study research can be useful to study people, groups, processes, etc., allowing for more flexibility in usage (Yazan, 2015).

Varying categories and characteristics to differentiate between case study types are described in the literature. Yin (2018) categorizes three types of case study designs: explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive. An explanatory case study seeks to explain a causal link between phenomena. Exploratory case studies aim to explore a phenomenon. The descriptive case study design seeks to describe the phenomenon in its real-life context (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Tellis,

1997a; Yin, 2018). Further, Stake's approach to case study suggests intrinsic, instrumental, and collective as variations of case study research. Intrinsic is defined as a case study design in which the researcher has an interest in the actual case and does not seek to build theory. Instrumental case study is utilized when the researcher wants to enhance and build upon a theory; it seeks to "provide insight into an issue" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 549; Yazan, 2015). Collective case study allows the researcher to make comparisons within and between cases (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015). Merriam offers three characteristics of case study designs: descriptive, particularistic, and heuristic. Like Yin's descriptive case study type, Merriam asserts that a case study can provide a detailed, thick description of the phenomenon being studied. The particularistic characteristic addresses a specific instance or situation and focuses on the particular phenomenon. Case studies also have a heuristic characteristic which "can bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known" (Merriam, 1998, p. 30; Yazan, 2015).

Generally, the type of case study the researcher chooses is aligned with the purpose of the research study. The current case study was guided by research questions which ask students to describe meaningful faculty interactions from their perspective. Thus, for this research, the case study design is descriptive in that it explored the intricacies of Black female adult learners and how they perceive and describe meaningful interactions with faculty members (Merriam, 1998). This case study is also particularistic in nature because it explored a specific aspect of Black female adult learners' educational experience, namely their interactions with community college faculty (Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015).

Case study research design is an appropriate paradigm to capture the complexities of the Black female adult learner's interactions with faculty. A major advantage of using this

methodology is the Black female adult learner is presented in the study in a manner that allows her to use her voice and describe her reality, her perspective, and her truth. The illumination of the participant's voice allowed the researcher to have a better "understanding of the phenomena that is being studied" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 554; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tellis, 2015b).

Subjectivity and Positionality

Subjectivity

Engaging, empowering, and educating Black women is important to me. At a young age, my maternal grandmother cultivated my love for Black womanhood, Black history, and Black excellence. She used her knowledge of self and voice to educate me. Through my grandmother's guidance I found my voice and moved through life challenging narratives that attempted to minimize who I knew I was, who my Black community was. Upon deciding to attend graduate school, I knew I wanted to focus my research on Black college women. I desired to dive deeper into the nuances of their educational experiences. I sought to bring their stories to the forefront.

As a Black woman, I am positioned within a historically marginalized and silenced group. It is important that I use my voice as a researcher to retell the stories and illuminate the voices of Black female adult learners to further the conversation of ways to improve student success through faculty-student interaction at community colleges. I ask myself: how can community colleges engage with students in a way that positively influences their experience? How can community colleges meet the needs of Black female adult learners if the institutions do not understand their experiences and have a clear, empirical grasp on what their unique needs are?

During my first semester in my doctoral program, I was introduced to Black Feminist Thought. After completing my first year of coursework, which included multiple theoretical

perspectives, Black Feminist Thought remained a salient academic framework that aligned with my personal beliefs as a Black woman. The framework's main purposes are resistance and empowerment. BFT seeks to empower Black women as they resist the dominant narrative. Being a Black woman and my desire to empower other Black women while also challenging dominant ideologies were the reasons why I chose Black Feminist Thought as my theoretical framework to guide this study.

The scholars, researchers, and authors I referenced in this study were also influenced by my strong connection to my Black female identity. For me, it was necessary to integrate the contributions and work of Black women into the pages of this research. Identifying as a Black woman who values Black womanhood influenced my inclusion of Black women in the higher education section of the review of literature. To demonstrate a positive image of Black women, it was necessary to emphasize that Black women construct knowledge; we are knowers and thinkers. It was necessary to affirm Black women in this case study.

Positionality

While the participants and I share a common ground on race and gender, it is important that I considered the potential of being viewed as an "outsider" in proximity to the participants' lives as I assumed the role of researcher. Other factors such as class, educational level, and color may have also influenced the participant-researcher relationship. There should not be an assumption that given my identity as a Black woman, the Black female participants would automatically forge a communal bond due to our shared identities (Few et al., 2003; Johnson-Bailey, 1999). However, Haynes and colleagues (2020) provided useful language regarding scholars studying Black women when they wrote, "Their research appeared to embrace methodological approaches that positioned them to do research *with* Black women rather than *on*

Black women" (p. 772). This approach to the research process views Black women as contributors and co-creators of knowledge alongside the researcher. As a Black woman desiring to do research *with* Black women, it is important to me that I exhibit care by validating their experiences and retell their stories with care and responsibility (Collins, 1989).

Due to the shared identities of being Black and a woman, it was essential that I was aware of any biases and assumptions about the participants and their experiences. Few and colleagues (2003) emphasize the need to view participants as dynamic individuals who define themselves and not just as research subjects. Throughout the research process, I engaged in self-reflexive practices by journaling and note taking to help identify subjectivities and provide a starting point for resolution (Few et al., 2003; Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Tracy, 2020).

Black women "deserve a diversity of representations of the theoretical, perceptual, and lived experiences of people who live, worship, and play like us" (Evans-Winter, 2019, p. 69). This study met this need by contributing the exploration of Black college women and their educational experiences to research through a theoretical lens developed by Black women for Black women. As a Black female researcher who also attended a community college and worked several years in the community college system, it was my hope that my personal and professional experiences would allow me to develop a connectedness with participants, create a safe space in which they can tell their stories, and enhance the "diversity of representations."

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides the foundation upon which the research study is built. It serves as the "anchor for the literature review, methods and analysis" (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 12). Black Feminist Thought theoretical framework centers Black women in analysis and maintains that Black women must use their own voices and tell their own stories through the

concept of self-definition. BFT structured the selection of study participants and data collection methods in the current study in that Black women must be the sources of data to tell their own stories and experiences (Collins, 1989, 2000; Hayes et al., 2022). To gain a better understanding of meaningful faculty interactions among Black female adult learners from their perspective, data must be collected from Black women to share their educational experiences.

Dialogue and safe spaces are elements of Black Feminist Thought relevant to this study. These key elements were used to inform the data collection methods to include interviews and reflective journals. The researcher sought to facilitate a caring, trusting, and respectful rapport with study participants to foster a space in which they would feel comfortable to engage and dialogue about their educational experience and interactions with faculty. Interviews quite literally gave the Black female adult learners the space to use their voice to tell their story, thoughts, and perspectives (Collins, 1989, 2000; Davis & Peters, 2022; Roulston, 2010). Use of reflective journals reemphasizes the "importance of autonomy and allows the women to share their experiences in a way that is authentic to them" outside of their scheduled time with the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Davis & Peters, 2022, p. 100; Merriam, 1998). In addition to Black Feminist Thought theoretical framework, validation theory and elements of adult learner theory conceptually influence the development of interview and reflective journal protocols. Lastly, the data analysis process included both an inductive and deductive approach. Inductive reasoning allowed themes to emerge from the data. Black Feminist Thought was also used as the framework to deductively analyze the data. The elements of knowledge validation, dialogue/voice, and safe spaces from BFT were used to create the coding structure.

Research Design

Research Site

The setting for the case study was a community college located in North Carolina. The college was selected due to the researcher's knowledge of the North Carolina Community College System. To maintain anonymity and protect the identity of the college, the pseudonym Eastern Community College (ECC) is used in this study. ECC is located in the Eastern part of North Carolina and currently has one campus to serve students. It is classified as a two-year, medium size college by Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education standards (American Council on Education, 2023). The medium size designation is based on "full-time equivalent enrollment data indicating enrollment of 2,000–4,999 students at these associate degree granting institutions" (American Council on Education, 2023). The community college was selected because of the specialized services offered to adult learners. The selection strategy intentionally excluded colleges located in large metropolitan areas (e.g., Raleigh/Durham, Charlotte, or Greensboro, NC) or in close proximity to military bases (e.g., Fayetteville or Goldsboro, NC). ECC has a significantly large percentage of female and part-time students, which made the college an ideal research site for recruiting female adult participants.

Regarding support services, the community college has counseling services available to all students. ECC currently has a Men's Resource Center whose overall purpose is to "provide services to men that enhance academic and personal success" (Eastern Community College, 2022). However, no such center is available for women to address women's issues and promote their academic and personal success. Table 3.1 provides a profile of the community college based on curriculum courses for the 2021-2022 academic year (Eastern Community College, 2022).

Table 3.1

Community College Profile (approximate statistics)

	Eastern Community College (ECC)
Total Enrollment (approx.)	10,000
Female Students	60%
Male Students	40%
Non-white Students	45%
Full-time Students	30%
Part-time Students	70%
Student/Faculty Ratio	23:1
Full-time Faculty (approx.)	215
Part-time Faculty (approx.)	260
Other Information	52% Financial Aid Recipients 42% Employed FT/PT

Adapted from Eastern Community College Website

An Eastern Community College staff member assisted with recruiting study participants as detailed in the recruitment subsection. The staff member was intentionally sought because of the individual's role at the college and access to communicating with the adult student population.

Data Collection

To document the experiences of Black female adult learners, six participants were recruited from the previously mentioned research site, Eastern Community College. Participants were asked to engage in two semi-structured interviews and to keep a reflective journal. Utilizing Black women as the sources of data in this study, their experiences and stories are dispelling the

dominant narrative about who Black college women are. These Black women used their voices to speak their truths as knowers and experts on their own lives (Evans-Winters, 2019). Bernice Reagon (as cited by Evans-Winters, 2019) presents a call for action "to document and disseminate the cultural histories and perceptions of Black women getting the story right for the next generation of scholars, practitioners, students and policymakers" (p. 20). This sentiment is echoed by others who agree with Black feminism that those who are committed to retelling the stories of Black women must get it right (Brown University, 2019).

Participants

Sampling Method

To address the study's research questions, purposeful sampling was utilized. Purposive sampling strategy is commonly used in qualitative research because it allows the researcher to select participants that can provide their perspective and insight about the phenomenon being studied. The purpose of the case study was to explore the educational experiences of Black female adult learners and their interactions with faculty members at community colleges by illuminating their voices and sharing their stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020). Thus, employing a purposeful sampling method was necessary to gather information about the experiences of Black college women, because Black women are experts on their unique, lived experiences (Collins, 1989, 2000).

As mentioned in chapter one, a great deal of the research on adult learners describes this subgroup of students as being over the age of 24 and having multiple life responsibilities such as employment, family, and other personal obligations. For this study, adult learner is defined as a student who is aged 25 or older, assumes multiple life roles and responsibilities, and is financially independent. A set criteria was used to screen and select participants to determine if

they qualify to participate in the study (Yin, 2018). The following criteria were used to determine study participant eligibility:

- Identifies as a Black woman
- Aged 25 years or older
- Financially independent
- Currently enrolled in a curriculum program (associate degree, diploma, or certificate program)
- Completed at least 12 credit hours of coursework

The participant self-identified as a Black woman to reemphasize the importance of self-definition asserted by Black Feminist Thought. Participants must have completed at least 12 credit hours (equivalent to one semester at full-time enrollment) of curriculum coursework, which allows sufficient exposure to faculty while not excluding students pursuing diploma or certificate programs. The study sought to be inclusive of all programs of study levels (associate degree, diploma program, and certificate program); this inclusion provided insight into differences among programs and faculty experiences. Additionally, current enrollment status was included as a requirement to allow for data collection to occur while the student is experiencing faculty interaction while providing a space to reflect on previous faculty interactions in the recent past. However, the type of enrollment status (e.g., full- or part-time, face-to-face) was not specified. These various types of enrollment statues were intentionally not specified as required criteria to diversify representation. Financial independence signified the participant was not dependent on other individuals or entities for monetary support. Purposive sampling gives emphasis to selecting participants who can provide rich information to better understand the

phenomenon being studied. Black female adult learners with their diverse educational contexts provided rich information to address the study's research questions (Merriam, 1998).

Sample Size

Sample size is another important aspect of the sample strategy. In qualitative research, smaller size samples are acceptable because there is an emphasis on providing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being studied rather than on generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative approaches like case studies, quality data with rich descriptions are more important than large sample sizes. A sample size of six participants was selected for this study (Tracy, 2020). It is important to note that five participants completed all three components of the study. The sixth participant withdrew from the study due to health issues after the initial interview, resulting in five participants completing the reflective journal and follow-up interview. Data from the sixth participant was included in the analysis as her voice and experiences are valued and made an important contribution to better understanding how Black female adult learners perceive meaningful faculty-student interactions.

Recruitment Strategy

Participants were recruited with the assistance of a campus staff member. The researcher sent an email to a senior-level administrator and requested the study recruitment flyer be emailed to adult learners (see Appendix A). The staff member has direct access to adult students enrolled at the community college. In addition to the community college staff member emailing the recruitment flyer to potential study participants, approval was requested to post the recruitment flyer on campus in locations such as classroom buildings, the library, student services departments, and other common areas with high student traffic.

The recruitment flyer included the purpose of the study, eligibility criteria, how information will be collected, information that a $50 egift card would be provided as an incentive to study participants, and the researcher's North Carolina State University email address to contact and indicate interest in participation (see Appendix B). Students interested in participating in the study emailed the researcher. Upon receiving the student's email, the researcher replied with study information and specified what participants are asked to complete for the study (see Appendix C). Additionally, the informed consent form was attached to the email for potential participants for review (see Appendix D). If the student met the criteria detailed above, she was scheduled for the initial interview.

Interviews

The literature maintains that interviews are commonly used in qualitative research and are the most important source of data in case studies (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2018). Tracy (2020) describes interviews as "conversations with a purpose" (p. 157). To address the study's research questions, semi-structured interviews were appropriate for providing the participants' perspective on meaningful faculty interactions without compromising the depth of the conversation. Semi-structured interviews provided a set of questions for the researcher to follow while allowing for an organic, conversational approach with the flexibility to use follow-up questions for clarifying, probing, and eliciting more detail about a topic of interest (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Tracy, 2020).

Interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method because Black feminist researchers commonly use personal narratives and conversations to gather information. Interviews provided perceptual information and an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' educational experiences and interactions with faculty (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Evans-Winters, 2019). Black Feminist Thought theoretical framework emphasizes the

criticality of dialogue and voice, which aligns with the use of interviews for the study (Collins, 1989, 2000; Evans-Winters, 2019).

Conducting qualitative research with marginalized groups can be sensitive and should be approached delicately (Moree, 2018). Seminal scholar Johnson-Bailey (1999) addresses power dynamics when Black women interview Black women and suggests maintaining a balance in dialogue. Few and colleagues (2003) also provide guidance for Black female researchers doing qualitative research with Black women. Similar to Johnson-Bailey, they suggest avoiding interruptions and over usage of personal citations to mitigate power relations. They also recommend Black women researchers be cognizant of their language when interviewing Black women participants. It is essential to validate the experiences of the Black female participants to empower them to share their stories. "Sharing these resources of knowledge within a safe, informant-defined space is empowering and useful in providing Black women a space to process their experience in a systemic manner" (Few et al., 2003, p. 207).

Reflective Journals

Literature suggests using additional data sources in conjunction with interview data. Reflective journals were used as supplemental data and offered insight into the lives of Black female adult learners as they reflected upon their experiences and perspectives (Davis & Peters, 2022; Merriam, 1998). The use of the journal provided the Black women a personal space in which they could reflect on their educational experiences in an authentic way that was comfortable and convenient for them. Thoughts, ideas, perceptions, or emotions can arise outside of the scheduled interviews and the reflective journals provided a method to capture their narrative voice (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Evans-Winter, 2019).

Data Collection Phases

Data were collected in three phases from each participant. The first phase was an initial interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. The second phase was a reflective journal consisting of two journal entries. The final data collection phase was a follow-up interview which generally lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Phase One of Data Collection

Study participants were selected based on participant criteria and desired sample size. Selected participants were contacted via phone and provided with detailed information about the study, then scheduled for the initial interview. Interviews were scheduled at times that were most convenient for participants' schedules. The participant was also asked to select a pseudonym. Pseudonyms were used throughout the research process to maintain the participants' anonymity. Participants were asked to review the informed consent form, which was emailed to them prior to the initial interview.

An email was sent to participants with the scheduled interview date, time, and Zoom link to access the private, virtual meeting room. Interviews were conducted via Zoom to provide the participants with flexibility and convenience as the women are adults who may have limited time available outside of their personal, professional, and academic schedules. Participants were asked to conduct the interview in a location free from distractions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). With participants' permission, Zoom technology transcribed and video and audio recorded the interviews. The North Carolina State University's Zoom technology files are password protected and are only accessible by the researcher.

The semi-structured initial interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. However, there were instances in which the interviews exceeded 60 minutes to allow the participant additional

time to provide insight and perspective on their experience. An interview protocol was used to guide the conversation with participants (see Appendix E). The protocol provided a systematic method to opening the interview, aligning the interview questions with the study's research questions, closing statements, and a reminder to thank the participants and ask if there are any questions or concerns about the interview or research process. It also provided a space for the researcher to jot notes or thoughts during the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Immediately after concluding the interview, the researcher would "brain dump" thoughts regarding any significant responses by the participant, notable connections to the literature, topics to revisit in the follow-up interview, or any parallels observed among participants (Saldaña, 2013).

Phase Two of Data Collection

At the conclusion of the initial interview, participants were asked to keep an audio, video, or written reflective journal and provided detailed journal information. The various types of journal entries provided participants with a method that was convenient for their schedules. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participant was emailed instructions and a journal protocol that included a list of prompts (see Appendix F) to guide the reflective journal entries. Participants were asked to complete two journal entries by a specified date and upload entries to a secured, password protected Google document folder created by the researcher. The shared folder was only accessible by the participant and researcher. Data from the initial interviews were analyzed during this data collection phase because research scholars emphasize the importance of simultaneously collecting and analyzing data (Merriam, 1998; Miles et al., 2020).

Phase Three of Data Collection

Participants engaged in a follow-up interview which allowed them the opportunity to discuss in detail the reflective journal and their reflective process. The second interview also

provided space to address the research questions (see Appendix G) with additional probing questions that were guided by the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The second interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, although a few participants needed additional time to engage (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Yin, 2018). As with the initial interview, at the conclusion of the follow-up interview, the researcher did a brain dump of any significant responses, connections to the literature, or patterns in responses between study participants.

Data Analysis

Upon collecting data, interview transcripts and written or audio materials from reflective journals were organized in an easily accessible and manageable manner. Yin (2018) and Merriam (1998) emphasize the need for organization of data at the beginning of the data analysis phase in case study research. While preparing the data for analysis, interview transcripts were reviewed and cleaned to ensure accuracy. During this preparation, I jotted down phrases or key terms used by the participants on sticky notes. This is described as pre-coding according to Saldaña (2013).

Data analysis can be defined as "the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read – it is the process of making meaning" (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). In qualitative research it is common to simultaneously collect data and analyze data. Once data collection began, the analysis process in this case study followed the three activities presented by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020): data condensation, drawing and verifying conclusions, and data display. These elements occurred alongside data collection iteratively.

Condensation sorts, transforms, simplifies, and focuses the data resulting in stronger data. Condensing data by reflective thinking, summarizing, writing memos, and taking notes on

emerging themes, codes, or patterns allows for conclusions to be drawn (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). The second component of analysis discussed by Miles and colleagues (2020) is drawing and verifying conclusions. Other researchers use the term *findings.* Nonetheless, this analysis activity involves remaining open while interpreting what the data mean. Conclusions and findings are also verified through various methods such as referring back to interview transcriptions, reviewing field notes, or confirming findings with colleagues (Miles et al., 2020). Both inductive and deductive approaches were used in the study. Inductive reasoning allowed for themes to emerge from the data as I asked, "What are the data telling me about faculty-student interactions and the experiences of Black female adult learners?" A major advantage of induction is that it allows for themes from the data to not be overlooked. From a deductive approach, the study's research questions and the elements of Black Feminist Thought theoretical framework served as a preliminary list of codes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2020).

Miles and colleagues' (2020) third data analysis activity is data display, which refers to an organized approach to convey condensed information. There are several display options such as matrices, models, and graphics which present cumbersome and overwhelming data in more compact and palatable illustrations that assist with understanding what is happening (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2020). Data analysis activities of condensation, drawing and verifying conclusions, and data display are concurrently happening with data collection in a cyclical, recursive process (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Miles et al., 2020).

Interview Data Analysis

The analysis process began with manual coding, occurring in two stages: first cycle and second cycle coding (Miles et al., 2020). For this case study, I began coding the initial interview data using a preliminary list of codes derived from the research questions. Initially, data were

color-coded with five codes: (1) description of FSI, (2) significance of FSI, (3) meaningful FSI, (4) other relationships/interactions, and (5) key statements.

The follow-up interview data used a deductive analytical approach to begin the analysis process. Three Elements of Black Feminist Thought, (1) knowledge validation, (2) dialogue/voice, and (3) safe spaces, served as the preliminary coding strategy (Collins, 1989; Miles et al., 2020). In addition to the three a priori codes derived from the study's theoretical framework, three additional codes were derived from the follow-up interview protocol: (4) influences on FSI, (5) identity related, and (6) expectations. These six codes were used in the initial iteration of data analysis for the follow-up interview.

During subsequent first-cycle coding iterations for both the initial and follow-up interview, an inductive analytical approach was used which allowed descriptive codes to emerge from the data. Descriptive coding was used because it provided a summary of words or phrases in the data. These emergent codes provided the "inventory of topics" to develop themes (Miles et al., 2014, p. 74). Codes were revised, combined, and refined during multiple analysis iterations. Descriptive codes from the data provided insight into the nuances of the educational experience such as student well-being, influences on interactions, perceptions of faculty, student-initiated interactions, other learning space interactions, student development, expectations of faculty, and faculty-initiated interactions.

Participants' key statements coded during the initial coding iteration were subsequently coded as in vivo codes. In vivo coding uses the participant's words or phrases. This type of coding strategy was selected because the voices of the participants are valuable and allows the audience to engage with her truths and experiences in her own words (Miles et al., 2014,

Saldaña, 2013) Notable participant quotes were also complied that captured the essence of a theme and provided deeper insight into the research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Code mapping was utilized to transition from first cycle coding to second cycle coding. This process involved visually placing all codes/subcodes on a poster board, then sorting and shifting codes/subcodes to group those that "seemed to go together" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 196). Second cycle coding condenses the data even further into themes, categories, or concepts (Miles et al., 2020; Roulston, 2010). Axial coding was employed as a second cycle coding strategy. The goal of axial coding is to group or rearrange first cycle codes in a way that is meaningful and "makes conceptual sense" (Tracy, 2020, p. 226). Thus, thematic analysis developed emergent themes from the list of codes by observing connections and relationships in the data, leading to a deeper understanding (Fugard & Potts, 2019; Merriam, 1998; Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2013).

Reflective Journal Analysis

Audio and written journal entries were submitted by participants. Audio entries were transcribed to yield a journal transcript. Along with the written reflective journal entries, journal data were analyzed using an inductive approach that allowed codes to emerge from the data. Similarly to the interview data, descriptive codes revealed topics related to identity, self-image, and perceptions by others.

Issues of Rigor

Validity and reliability are terms used in quantitative research; several equivalent terms have been used to approach validation in qualitative research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Terms such as credibility, authenticity, and confirmability have been used to establish trustworthiness and rigor in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These terms, among others, are used as an alternative to validation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rigor is

defined as “the care and effort taken to ensure that the research is carried out in an appropriate manner” (Tracy, 2020, p. 271). To ensure rigor, I followed the criteria for high quality qualitative research of credibility of data and sincerity presented by Tracy (2020).

Credibility

Credibility “refers to whether the participants’ perceptions match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 112). To ensure credibility of data, I used triangulation of multiple data sources, thick descriptions, and member reflections with study participants. It is recommended to use multiple data sources when conducting case study research. Credibility of data can be achieved through triangulation and converging data from multiple data points (Tracy, 2020).

Triangulation of data sources ensures the accuracy of the participants’ perception using multiple lenses (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Tracy, 2020; Yin, 2018). This was attained through the use of semi-structured interviews which allow space for in-depth conversation. A conversational approach seeks to build trust with participants. Active listening, asking background questions to gain contextual information, and additional probing reduces the likelihood of flat data. Thick description was also used in the study and aimed to enhance credibility of data. Rich, detailed descriptions about the participant’s educational experiences and their interactions with faculty was provided through interviews and reflective journals to illuminate the voices and tell the stories of Black college women (Tracy, 2020).

To further establish credibility of data, I gave participants the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and provide feedback on emerging themes through member reflection as presented by Tracy (2020). Member reflection, as opposed to member checks, “allows for sharing and dialoguing with participants about the study’s findings, providing opportunities for

questions, critique, feedback, affirmation and even collaboration" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). Reflections from study participants can provide reflective insight upon completion of the formal data collection process (Tracy, 2020).

Sincerity

This qualitative research study was "genuine and vulnerable" (Tracy, 2020, p. 272). As a sincere researcher, it was my goal and hope to engage with the Black women in the study in a way that affirms and empowers who they are. Sincere researchers consider the needs of the participants and the potential audience who may engage with the research (Tracy, 2020). During the research process, it was essential that I was attuned to these women, their spoken and unspoken messages, their laughter, their solemness, their openness, or their hesitations.

Self-reflexivity is an integral and necessary aspect of sincerity (Tracy, 2020). Self-reflexive journaling was utilized throughout the research process to allow myself the opportunity to identify subjectivities and assumptions and process my own thoughts and questions that arose from engaging with the participants (Roulston, 2010).

I have a deep awareness of my own identity as a Black woman in higher education, which translates into my deep passion for issues and topics related to Black college women. Assuming the role of a sincere researcher, trust and respect are woven into the fabric of the study, and I was committed to fostering trusting and respectful relationships with the Black female adult participants who shared their stories with me (Evans-Winters, 2019).

Ethical Considerations

Creswell and Poth (2018) assert that qualitative researchers should adhere to three principles of ethics: "respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice" (p. 54). As the researcher, it was essential that I created a respectful researcher-participant relationship and

protected the privacy of the participants. Study participants and the community college research site were given pseudonyms to protect identities. Participants also completed a voluntary informed consent form through verbal consent and were given the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the duration of the study. The welfare of the participants is of the highest concern and as the researcher, it was my priority to address risks and protect the study participants. Participants were treated fairly and with care (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Steele, 2022). Additionally, data were stored in a password protected North Carolina State University Google Drive and iCloud only accessible by me. North Carolina State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was gained prior to proceeding with the study.

Limitations and Strengths

Limitations

Any research study is subjected to limitations. The case study did not include the perspectives of community college faculty. In the exploration of faculty-student relationships, it is important to gain a better understanding of both student and faculty's viewpoints and perspectives regarding interactions and engagement. There also could be additional factors that influence the faculty-student relationship in which faculty could provide their insight.

Another limitation of the study was the sample size. While smaller sample sizes are a characteristic of case studies, it is important to emphasize that Black female adult learners are dynamic and do not constitute a monolithic group. Additional study participants would increase diversity of representation, allowing for a closer examination of the experiences of Black college women (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Merriam, 1998). Further, the number of research sites that were used presents a limitation. The community college was

situated in one southern state, therefore limiting the scope of the study. An expansion of research sites across the state or throughout the United States would provide an opportunity to observe similarities and differences among study participants' experiences and interactions with faculty.

Strengths

To address the limitations, the research design of the study serves as a key strength. Case studies are commonly used in educational research and provide an appropriate approach to investigate educational policies, procedures, and programs (Merriam, 1998). The data were collected in a layered approach that included an interview, reflective journaling, and a second interview, which together provided in-depth insight into the experiences of Black female adult learners. The data allow the audience to better understand who she is and how to better meet her educational needs. Thus, an additional strength of the study is the utility of informing faculty development in the community college. Information regarding how students perceive faculty interactions can be useful in improving campus involvement of students of color and enhancing faculty-student relationships. Additionally, my positionality serves as a strength in that as a Black woman I affirmed, validated, and valued the participants of the study. It was my hope that by approaching the research process with genuine care I would be able to engage with Black female adult learners who trust me to retell their stories and amplify their voices.

Chapter Summary

Qualitative case study research design was utilized in examining meaningful faculty interactions among Black female adult learners. The Black Feminist Thought theoretical framework influenced the way in which I approached the research design process. Aligning with the elements of BFT, I employed care and responsibility as I researched *with* Black women. This point is emphasized by Dillard (2016) who writes that "research is responsibility" for Black

women studying other Black women. With care, data were collected through two semi-structured interviews and a reflective journal to capture the experiences of the participants. The resulting in-depth insight into the lived experiences of Black female adult learners will enhance our understanding of meaningful faculty interaction that positively influences their overall educational experience.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The primary purpose of this case study was to examine meaningful faculty-student interactions from the perspective of Black female adult learners attending a community college. By amplifying the voices of these women, college faculty, staff, administrators, and others committed to a student-centered learning community can begin to better understand their experiences and how those experiences influence interactions and engagement with their faculty and peers. Illuminating the voices of Black female adult learners sheds light on the importance of faculty-student interaction and the influence it can have on these women's educational journeys. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do Black female adult learners describe their meaningful interactions with community college faculty?
2. How do Black female adult learners describe the significance of faculty-student interactions?
    a. How do Black female adult learners describe the significance of other learning space interactions?

This chapter begins with a participant overview followed by detailed participant profiles which share the voice of each participant, including reflective journal excerpts to highlight the reflective thoughts of what it means to be a Black female adult learner. Next, emergent themes and subthemes are presented which discuss the perspective of Black female adult learners and their interactions with faculty members and peers. Black Feminist Thought and validation theory along with the study's research questions guide the development of the four themes presented. The study's findings are presented in detail in chapter five along with recommendations and conclusion.

Overview of Participants

Six participants from Eastern Community College (ECC) were selected to participate in this study. Each participant self-identified as a Black female, was aged 25-40 years old, was financially independent, was enrolled at ECC in an associate degree program during the fall 2023 and spring 2024 semesters, and had completed at least 12 credit hours prior to participating in the study. These dynamic women came from a variety of educational backgrounds, profession career fields, and family structures. They were also at various stages of their academic programs, ranging from at the beginning of their degree to finishing in fall 2024. Most of the women transferred credits from previous community colleges to apply towards their ECC degree. Table 4.1 provides an overview for each participant, including her self-selected pseudonym, age range, degree program, and previous college experience.

Table 4.1

Overview of Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age Range	Degree Program	Previous College Experience
Mo	35-40	Business Administration	4-year college/ community colleges
Esmeralda	25-30	Health Science	4-year college/ community colleges
Kelly	35-40	Business Administration-Transfer	None
Lydia	30-35	Pre-Health Science	4-year colleges
Camille	30-35	Business Administration-Finance & Science Technology (dual degree)	Community colleges
Faith	30-35	Business Administration-HRD	Community colleges

Mo's Voice Amplified

Mo is currently completing her second associate degree at ECC in Business Administration Marketing. However, ECC is not her first college. Upon graduating high school, she attended a historically Black university where she completed one year. Mo returned home after her freshman year and decided to attend a smaller college, leading her to Eastern Community College. After years of starting and stopping her educational pursuits, Mo completed her first associate degree in 2020. An L-shaped desk tucked away in Mo's bedroom provides a place of comfort while she studies and finishes her business degree. In addition to her college career, she is an entrepreneur and runs a successful business, all while working another full-time job.

Mo's journal entry reflected on feelings of intimidation as an adult student. She believes there is an assumption that adult students are "not able to learn or grasp concepts as well as younger individuals." This feeling of intimidation played a major role in her decision to enroll in online classes. The online class setting allows her to feel more comfortable and avoid any possible negative perception of adult students from others. Mo expressed that as an adult student with experience "both outside of education and in the classroom setting" she does not require much from faculty and interacts with them minimally. She feels self-sufficient in her online classes and that if students decide to take online courses there should be a level of comfort with minimal interactions with faculty and peers. She stated:

> *…we pretty much had to teach ourselves. I feel like I read the material and do the work and submit the assignments. So that's what I mean by the bare minimum. When I take online courses, I feel like I don't really need much interaction unless I'm struggling with something.*

While Mo initially expressed that being Black did not influence how she interacts or engages with faculty, upon reflecting she realized that an experience in high school did have lasting effects on her educational journey. She felt that the high school incident was due to her being a Black female, as all the individuals affected were females of color. This incident caused her to become more vocal, ask questions, and advocate for herself with regards to her education. Mo shared:

> *It gave a drive to you know, go beyond what may be expected of me as a woman of color…It hurts but also gave me like, like I said…a drive to go beyond and to try to have the best.*

Esmeralda's Voice Empowered

Esmeralda balances motherhood and completing her health science degree. She began her program at ECC in fall 2023. She previously attended two four-year universities but a change in her career goals lead her to enroll at ECC for the first time. Esmeralda also attended another community college in a neighboring county but ultimately returned to ECC upon acceptance into the health science degree program. She now frequents ECC's library for study sessions with her peers.

She described having decent experiences with faculty in the past. However, the overarching theme to her engaging with faculty was "basically like you got it for yourself. Like there's nothing I can do to assist you or help you." Despite feeling as though her faculty were not helpful in many regards, she did highlight an experience at one of her previous universities in which she felt supported and cared about.

Since returning to the community college to pursue her health science degree, she reflected on being an adult student:

> *I'm going to have more barriers in place that I might not have had if I had finished school younger with less responsibilities. I mean, I have to work harder. I might have to sacrifice more when it comes to family and leisurely things because it's just a time crunch.*

Esmeralda also reflected on being a Black student at her community college. She asked if faculty are aware of the challenges students face pursuing their college education and dealing with "the outside world." She emphasized "stuff is so much different now. I know there's more opportunities for…Black people in general but it all feels like sort of like a challenge." Although she has experienced struggles, she feels faculty who look like her will view her as another representation of Black success.

Kelly's Voice Celebrated

Kelly described herself as a track star when it comes to committing to her educational pursuits. This mother of two has started and halted her college admissions process several times, never completing the process until 2022. She admits to commitment issues regarding employment and education. However, in the summer of 2022 Kelly officially enrolled at ECC to pursue business administration. Out of necessity, Kelly moved her desk to her bedroom from the living room. This new location allows her to study and complete homework free from distraction. She now takes pride in her education and looks forward to graduating with her associate degree as her oldest child graduates from high school.

In her journal, she reflects on the joys of motherhood and her admiration for her own mother. She shares:

> *Growing up in my eyes, my mother was unstoppable. There was absolutely nothing she couldn't do. I saw her attend and complete college while working two jobs and taking the*

> *upmost care of home. My mother would make it her business to show up to any and every event I was a part of. To me this was the definition of a Black woman.*

Kelly described how she thinks of strength and endurance when she thinks about being a Black woman who is also an adult student. She shared that she values and truly appreciated the specialized services offered to adult students at her college. Having an open space for adult students gives Kelly a sense of belonging. When she started her degree, she was "terrified" as it had been over 20 years since she left high school. She expressed that she wanted to give up multiple times and "throw it all away. I must have the strength and endurance to press forward."

She also discussed her previous education experience in high school. She shared:

> *I've never felt teachers actually…cared or it was more than just teach. I didn't have a great experience with the teachers, and I think that's why I stayed away from wanting to do any type of furthering my education afterwards.*

Despite her reluctance to pursue her college degree and her lack of commitment in the past, she is determined to complete her associate degree and plans to continue her education by transferring to a four-year university to obtain her bachelor's degree in business administration.

Lydia's Voice Valued

Lydia is returning to ECC to pursue a health science degree. She studies and works from home in the comfort of her bedroom and two-screen set up. This full-time employed mother is embarking on a career change. She enrolled at Eastern Community College having earned a graduate degree and worked in her previous career field for a number of years. Upon deciding to make a pivot professionally, a former professor served as a mentor and supported her during this shift.

Now that she is pursuing her new career path at ECC, in her journal she reflected, “the last time I went on campus, there are so many Black staff members, particularly women. That stood out to me. I was thrilled to learn that we are making great representation in our community.” In her reflective thoughts, she shared that as a Black woman she often feels underestimated, and she has to prove herself in the workplace. She shared that “I also feel as though if I get overly dramatic, if I am passionate about something, I think they would feel like I was ‘doing too much.’ I am not sure that Black women are often heard.” However, during her time at ECC, she explained the faculty that she has interacted with just see her as a person.

Lydia also explained how she sees Black women. She reflected that when she thinks of Black women she thinks of resiliency. She expressed her pride in being a Black woman and the successes Black women have experienced. She also shared it can be discouraging to think about the struggles faced by Black women but knowing there have been triumphs uplifts her.

Camille’s Voice Magnified

Camille is pursuing dual degrees in finance and science technology at Eastern Community College. The mother of four is an entrepreneur who balances motherhood, her coursework, and her startup company. Camille steals away time to study at her kitchen table. While this is an open space in her home, the location is ideal as it is at a distance from the busyness of bedrooms and potential distractions. Prior to starting at ECC she attended other community colleges in surrounding counties.

In her journal entries, she reflected on her experiences as an adult learner returning to the learning environment. She shared:

> *When I started my journey as an adult learner, I felt a little embarrassed and out of place. I felt like everyone could tell that I was one of the oldest ones in the class and this*

> *made me feel judged. I'm sure this wasn't always the case but now that I've become more focused and intentional about my why, I'm no longer concerned with what it may look like to others. I take pride in being an adult learner mainly because my goals are much more clear at this stage in my life.*

She described her growth and maturation as a student and how being an adult learner has been a rewarding experience. During her educational experiences over the years, she consistently had an interest in business. However, with starting her own business she has now aligned her education to her entrepreneurial goals. Her degrees in finance and science technology will enhance her knowledge base as she builds a successful company.

Camille recalled a professional situation in which being a Black woman was relevant. She was the only woman of color featured as a speaker at an event attended by a Black audience. She explained that it was important to her to "show up in this space, in this time and…be a voice for them as well because most of them I'm sure share some type of similarities to what my journey has looked like." She felt it was her responsibility to use her "platform to bring attention to the fact that hey, not only do we add value, but we need more resources like this for us." Camille reflected that as a Black female adult learner she pushes herself to be the best. There are no other options.

Faith's Voice Illuminated

Faith is a full-time employee, full-time ECC student, and full-time mother to four children. She spends her study time on the couch with a laptop table in the living room late at night when the children are asleep or early morning before they wake. Faith is currently pursuing an associate degree in business administration with a concentration in human resources

development. Prior to returning to ECC in spring 2024, Faith attended three community colleges in other parts of North Carolina.

In addition to her community college experiences, Faith's primary school experiences greatly influenced not only her outlook on education but also her social interactions. She was homeschooled until the age of 15 and enjoyed the freedom to accelerate her learning, engage in reading that fostered academic development, and participate in the arts as a pastime. Upon entering the public school system in North Carolina, Faith was stifled by the rigidness of the curriculum and struggled to socialize with her peers. Despite encountering a few teachers and a school administrator who provided guidance and support, Faith left high school before graduating.

Her love for learning prompted her enrollment in a GED program at her local community college. After which she enrolled as a curriculum, degree seeking student. However, Faith explained that her lack of maturity was the main reason for not committing to her educational goals. She attended multiple community colleges pursuing both curriculum and continuing education programs. After working in the human resources industry for several years, Faith decided to return to ECC and complete her associate degree in human resources development.

A Collective Voice

The women in this study described themselves as committed to their education at this stage of their lives. Mo, Esmeralda, Kelly, Camille, Lydia, and Faith expressed how as adult learners they made space for college; they were making a sacrifice to pursue their educational goals. They balanced employment and running businesses, raising children, managing households, and other responsibilities along with completing their college degrees. The six Black female adult learners spoke about what their layered identities meant to them. While they used

various words to describe themselves as Black women—using terms and phrases such as resilient, magical, superheroes without a cape, endurance, unstoppable, survivor mode—they also shared how descriptors from others depicting them as *strong* can create pressure and stress in the learning space. These women described the role faculty and peers play in their educational experience and the value of seeing other Black women on their college campus.

Presentation of Themes

The study's research questions, Black Feminist Thought theoretical framework, and validation theory guided the examination of faculty-student interactions among Black female adult learners enrolled at community colleges. Descriptive and in vivo codes were developed during data analysis which resulted in four emergent themes. The first theme, Voices of Black Female Adult Learners, explores the various influences on faculty-student interactions and had two subthemes, Muted and Unmuted. The second theme, "I deserve faculty members to push me forward," describes meaningful faculty-student interactions and expectations Black female adult learners have of faculty members. The second theme also had two subthemes, The Faculty in Faculty-Student Interactions and Safe Spaces. The third theme, "Having those experiences just make you feel like you're seen," describes the importance of faculty-student interactions and includes three subthemes: The Student, The Professional, and The Person. Lastly, the fourth theme, "My peers are basically like faculty and my advisors," explores meaningful peer interactions and relationships. Table 4.2 summarizes the four emergent themes and corresponding subthemes.

Table 4.2

Emergent Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Voice of Black Female Adult Learners	• Muted • Unmuted
"I deserve faculty members to push me forward": Meaningful Faculty-Student Interaction	• The Faculty in Faculty-Student Interactions • Safe Spaces
"Having those experiences just make you feel like you're seen": Significance of Faculty-Student Interaction	• The Student • The Professional • The Person
"My peers are basically like faculty and my advisors": Meaningful Peer Interactions and Relationships	

Voices of Black Female Adult Learners

Student voice can be described as one critical aspect of the interaction between the faculty member and the student. Grappling with voice and dialogue is necessary in the examination of meaningful faculty-student interaction through the Black Feminist Thought theoretical lens. Dialectical interactions create a space for knowledge and previous experiences to be validated. Black Feminist Thought emphasizes finding voice and sharing experiences which can foster connectedness and relationship building (Collins, 1989, 2000).

There were various factors that influenced how Black female adult learners in this study interacted with their faculty. Most described their interaction and engagement with faculty members as comfortable. Mo rated herself a ten as being very comfortable and stated, "I'm the type to, you know, I like to communicate because that, that helps me get to an understanding of what they want and also at the same time, help them get a plan where I'm coming from." Camille

believes her comfort to interact is derived from a necessity to engage, “if I’m not leaning into my class, I don’t make the best grades…I really have to be involved; I’ve got to ask questions.” Similarly, Lydia stated she does not shy away from engaging with her faculty but that “it’s just about how the professor approaches the class…they set the precedence. That’s always my indicator of how comfortable I am.” Kelly was honest and said she is unsure how comfortable she is because she takes online courses, stating, “I’ve been able to do everything behind the keyboard.” She anticipates she will be able to bring her keyboard confidence into the classroom when she starts her in-person course.

Esmeralda fell on the opposite end of the comfort spectrum when interacting with faculty. She shared:

> *Oh, I’m not really comfortable interacting with them at all because I don’t like being perceived or seen as uneducated if I’m asking certain questions or not as smart as my counterparts. So, I just avoid interacting with them as a whole. I don’t even think they make an open environment. I mean, they say ask questions, but they don’t. I don’t really think they…I don’t know. But I’m not comfortable at all (Esmeralda, Interview).*

Table 4.3 summarizes the various influences on faculty-student interactions.

Table 4.3

Participant Perspectives on Faculty-Student Interaction Influences

	Mo	Lydia	Esmeralda	Kelly	Camille
Comfort level interacting/ engaging with faculty	Very comfortable; communication aids in understanding.	Determined by faculty's approach to students and demeanor.	Uncomfortable due to fear of being perceived as uneducated; untrusting of faculty.	Unsure due to online course environment; engages behind keyboard.	Comfortable; focuses on communicating in a way that is receptive and meets objective of interaction.
Ways adult learner identity influences interactions	Ease of communicating, increased relatability.	Increased confidence; more comfortable.	Exhibits professionalism and respect; views faculty as on the same level as adults.	Exhibits respect as one adult to another adult.	Approaches as adult-to-adult interaction with respectful boundaries.
Ways female identity influences interactions	Exhibits respect and attempts to avoid being perceived as an opportunist by faculty of a different gender.	More reserved and alert with faculty of a different gender.	No influence.	Intentional physical distance.	No influence.
Ways Black identity influences interactions	No influence.	No influence.	Minimizes interactions due to a lack of understanding regarding feelings and experiences.	Increased confidence to mitigate societal stereotypes of Black women.	Presents self as a professional desiring to make a good impression.
Behavioral changes due to racial differences	*Behaves the same regardless of faculty race*		*Adjusts behavior with faculty a different race*		
	Approach is determined by faculty's demeanor, not race.	Mirrors behavior of faculty during interactions; reciprocation.	Silent to avoid being perceived as "outspoken Black women."	Alters speech and gestures to avoid "angry Black lady" assumptions.	"Code switches," tones down personality, and attempts to not appear intimidating.

Note. Data derived from follow-up interview; thus, Faith is not included.

Muted

While most of the women stated they were comfortable interacting and engaging with their faculty, a recurrent theme in the data revealed these Black female adult learners were altering, softening, or completely silencing their voices in the learning space. Faith explained that the lack of meaningful interactions with her faculty deterred her from wanting to initiate conversations with instructors. She shared, "I would definitely say that it's just sort of an underlying fear. You don't, I don't really know what I'm going to get with you. I don't know how to approach this situation best." This hesitation was echoed by Esmeralda who said, "I can't risk saying something that looks like I don't know what I'm talking about." She described the pressure to be right and the importance of being viewed as intelligent. Kelly and Lydia also discussed societal pressures and negative stereotypes of Black women as academically inferior. Pressure to "say the right thing" and fear create a learning space in which Faith and Esmeralda are reluctant to speak up.

Hesitation can also lead to silence and complete avoidance of interacting with faculty. Interestingly, Esmeralda shared a class observation:

> *I feel like that majority of Black women that I've seen, like in my classes, that I've seen in lab are quiet. And I don't know if we're quiet because we are perceived as being loud and boisterous. Or are quiet for the same reason I'm quiet. Because I know they're doing well because some people have been dropping…but I'm seeing the same Black girls…I feel we all as a whole are quiet.*

She also shared her lack of trust as another reason she does not engage with her faculty. Emeralda does not give her full self when talking to her professors and "doesn't necessarily trust all of them with how I feel and my experiences because I don't think they would understand."

Similarly, Camille, Kelly, and Faith described how they do not show up as their full selves when interacting with faculty of a different race. The need to be cognizant of their body language and hand gestures when speaking with White faculty was discussed. The women also explained feeling as though they had to tone down their personality so as to not be perceived as loud or angry. In her follow-up interview Camille shared:

> *I try not to come off like intimidating. So, to kind of tone myself down a little bit. It doesn't stop me from saying what I need to say or asking questions, but I'm very much aware of like gestures, body, body language, tone.*

Kelly, Camille, and Faith expressed how they believed they have to dilute themselves when interacting with faculty. Faith not only questions her body language but her appearance when engaging with others. She expressed frustration with assumptions of Black women and stated:

> *Is it okay for me to have colored hair today or is that going to be too Black for me? Is it okay for me to not wear the long sweater because I don't want to get up and intimidate the women who think that my physique is too curvaceous today…Pardon my vernacular if that sounds a little too Black for you. Just a sense of insecurity that lingers with communicating with other people (Faith, Interview).*

In addition to their Blackness influencing how they interact and engage with faculty, a majority of the women shared they would interact differently with faculty of a different gender.

With the exception of Esmeralda, all the women described avoiding interactions with male faculty that could be taken out of context. They mentioned the need for a respectful distance, open office doors during meetings, remaining alert, and being more reserved. Kelly, who is usually vocal with her faculty, described an instance in which she was hesitant to email her male faculty member. She shared:

> *Yeah so, I do feel freely able to speak (pause)…I say all that to say, do I? Because when I had to go to the emergency room and have my procedure done, I didn't want to speak up because I didn't want it to be known that I had a procedure done…So you know that makes me think. I think it was a personal because it was a woman, a womanly personal issue. That might be why I didn't feel free to speak up (Kelly, Interview).*

Multiple factors influence how Black female adult learners interact and engage with faculty members. How these women perceive faculty also shape their perspective of faculty-student interactions.

The women discussed assumptions they hold about faculty members such as their busy schedules and challenges they may face trying to manage their student load. Mo expressed, "I'm sure they have a lot on their plate." Camille shared a similar perception that faculty have multiple classes and it may not be realistic to expect them to interact with each and every one of their students. Esmeralda also holds the assumption that "I feel like they don't understand, like they should understand, like adult students, how it is to be an adult student with children." Lydia shared her perceptions about faculty's motivations, stating "So if I feel like a professor is just like nonchalant, just you know, hey I'm just here for a check, it's a little bit hard for me to get into the material." The perceptions of and assumptions about faculty members influence how they engage with the class and how they interact with their faculty. This was made evident by a statement from Esmeralda:

> *I don't really feel like they really want to help sometimes. I feel like they just want to get through the day…They don't really have time for anything extra. They have all these students and then I come through with a question…And the first time I'm going to get some resistance that'd be the last time I ever reach out. So, I just choose in order to not*

> *have that negative feeling about a staff member, I just don't interact with them. I'm just not comfortable doing it.*

Unmuted

All of the women, with the exception of Esmeralda, described themselves as inquisitive, as students who intentionally sit in the front of the classroom or introduce themselves to faculty early in the semester. These women engage, talk, ask, email, inquire, and interact. Mo shared, "I feel like I'm able to share my thoughts, but the thing is even if I'm not, I'm the type to still do it in a respectful way. But you know…because that's just how I am." Kelly also noted that at the beginning of the semester she contacts her faculty in addition to completing any icebreaker activities for the class. She shared, "I go ahead and send my professor an email like hey, I'm still kind of new to this. And my name is Kelly, you know, just those little basic things. Just to kind of build that bridge." Camille shared similar thoughts:

> *I've been very intentional with my online classes by reaching out emailing, being…just trying to go over and above just like class participation, but not being afraid to email my faculty member directly if I have a question about anything.*

Mo, Kelly, Camille, and Lydia maintained their diligence with initiating interactions with their faculty members. Kelly expressed:

> *I'm the girl now that, I ask questions. I ask questions if I don't understand…I will hit a professor right now, "hey can I come to campus to see you or do a quick video chat?" so I could use my hands to explain what I'm trying to say.*

Camille and Mo echoed the same sentiments of self-advocacy. As Camille stated, "I need to show up for me. Like I need to make sure that, how can I say this? Let me say, it's like a

responsibility." It was essential for these women to advocate for themselves, which necessitated initiating interaction with their faculty.

Lydia and Mo emphasized that students should be held accountable and initiate faculty-student interactions when necessary. Lydia shared, "I'm just keeping good communication as well. But that's like not just on faculty, that's on students as well." A prevalent theme revealed in the data was the student's role in faculty-student interactions. Mo's statement supports the importance of student-initiated interactions. She expressed, "if they are struggling with something then I feel like student's point at that point to initiate or just make that reach out" (Mo, Interview).

Self-advocacy, the desire to build a rapport with faculty, and student accountability were shared as factors that influenced Black female adult learners to initiate interactions with their faculty. Their layered identities also played a role in being vocal with faculty members. A majority of the women stated that being an adult learner with prior educational or workplace experience gave them more confidence interacting with faculty, and they interacted in such a way that established boundaries and mutual respect. Camille shared:

> *So as far as being an adult learner, I actually feel like it's easier for me to have conversations with my instructors because as I look at it, you know, adult to adult. Got a little more lived experience now. So, I can even try to draw connections, you know. And establish relationships a little sooner and quicker than I could earlier on.*

The women explained that their role as an adult learner was an asset in how they interact and engage with faculty. Lydia voiced:

> *I feel more comfortable to speak my mind or if I have a question, I feel more comfortable. Just with all the years being in school, I think that's helped my confidence with speaking to professors and how to approach them.*

Interestingly, while most of the women shared that they would interact differently if the faculty member was of a different gender, one study participant explained that she is more comfortable with her male faculty members despite not being a vocal student. Esmeralda explained, "I feel like this is where, I feel like I'll be more comfortable interacting with a male than a female for some reason." She shared that in her previous colleges the male instructors have been more approachable, and her female instructors were intimidating.

While the women described how being Black caused them to alter the way in which they present themselves and engage with faculty, Kelly emphasized how being a Black woman empowers her to be confident. She shared:

> *Don't go in there doubting yourself, even if you ain't sure of yourself. Don't allow no one to see you doubt yourself. It's okay to not know and it's okay to say I don't know…We already have one strike against us. So, like my mom always said walk with your head high because for one, you need people to see your face. And for two, sometimes it'll stop the tears from coming down when your head is high…So definitely have confidence. I guess that's what I'd say, have confidence and respect for yourself (Kelly, Interview).*

Similarly, Lydia expressed, "Like, I'm a Black woman yes. I am Black and I don't care who knows. Like I don't try and hide it in any capacity. I tried to be authentically myself." Camille further expounded, "I just want to be able to have like…be able to bring my voice to the table, not have to change it, but just as it is. Like, this is my thought, appreciated and acknowledged." These women want to interact with their faculty. They desire to build relationships and a rapport

with faculty. They want to share their thoughts, opinions, and ideas. They want their voices to be heard.

"I deserve faculty members to push me forward": Meaningful Faculty-Student Interactions

Another prevalent theme that emerged from the data was how the Black female adult learners perceived interactions with their faculty that were meaningful to their educational experience. This theme addresses research question one, as it describes from the students' vantage point what is meaningful, appreciated, and desired from faculty-student interactions. The women described the importance of faculty providing feedback and how much they valued receiving responses from their faculty in a timely manner. Each woman detailed her expectations of her faculty members and the source of her expectations. All of the women, with the exception of Faith, were asked about their opinion of who should initiate faculty-student interactions. The women expressed that faculty should initiate interactions and engagement with students. The *faculty* in faculty-student interactions was emphasized.

The Faculty in Faculty-Student Interactions

The women in this study discussed how the majority of faculty-initiated interactions were students being told about the faculty's office hours. The women shared their surprise and how much it meant to them in instances where faculty members initiated contact beyond the generic "here are my office hours." Lydia described:

> *I mentioned this in the other interview, but it was just very impactful for me. When I had my Algebra teacher reach out to me because I didn't turn in my assignment. Like, that just really blew me away because most professors would just be like okay, zero. But she saw that hey, you usually turn your assignments in, and you kept turning in your*

> *assignments. Something must be wrong…But I really appreciate it, that she took the time to reach to me like that.*

Faculty "taking the time" was also mentioned by Kelly, who appreciated her faculty member taking time to engage with her and her peers. She described in detail how she was enrolled in an asynchronous online course and her faculty member would create weekly videos to send to the class. The videos were personal, thorough, engaging, and provided an informative outline of the upcoming week. She explained he was the only faculty member she had who extended himself in this manner. She shared, "the fact that he took the time to do it, to share his screen. He did care to make sure that you weren't in the wrong place" (Kelly, interview).

Similarly, Mo associated faculty-initiated interactions with support and care. She described a faculty member reaching out when she was getting behind in her work and suggesting support services such as tutoring. She shared:

> *So, they will reach out before the end and try to help me as much as possible…make sure I was okay before that withdrawal deadline ended. So that helped me see that they actually cared about my educational well-being (Mo, Interview).*

Overall, the women emphasized how faculty should take the initiative and contact students. The interactions could range from a general check-in email to addressing academic concerns. Camille also shared:

> *And I will say especially now, like to get an email from my faculty without me emailing, just to say hey, you know, how's everything going? I saw you made a good grade on this. Or you know, just a little check in or something like that. Now that would make me feel good. I'm not gonna lie to you, that will make me feel good.*

Esmeralda voiced, “I think the faculty member should…they should know that students already feel inadequate. So come down to our level and be like, look what’s going?” Faculty-initiated interactions were described as creating a more approachable learning space in which faculty can set the tone. Lydia stated, “when faculty reaches out even if it’s just to everyone as a whole, that makes students more comfortable to reach back out if they need help.” More faculty-initiated mandatory meetings, more faculty-initiated email touch points, more faculty-initiated meet and greets with students were requests made by the Black female adult learners.

Additionally, all of the women discussed specific feedback from faculty as meaningful to their educational experience. Faith shared:

> *I like frequent critique and feedback…I thought I was a great writer and she’s very thorough. And she was the kind of thorough that she really critiqued every nuance of your work…but I loved it, you know. Critique me! Help me be the best I can be.*

Each woman discussed her unique experiences with needing and wanting feedback that was specific to her work, her areas of strength, and the areas where she needs improvement. They described feedback as necessary for academic development. Mo stated:

> *Just having them for the questions and assignments, even just giving me feedback. I don’t mean just a “great job Mo” type of feedback. Like going into the extent of what they liked about my response or my submissions makes me feel valued and not just giving me like a general statement.*

Specific feedback was revealed in the data as meaningful and made the women feel their thoughts and ideas were being heard and valued. Feedback on assignments, discussion forums, and overall course progress were emphasized as valuable and needed by the women.

Faculty providing feedback on long-term academic and career planning were also mentioned as meaningful. Kelly and Camille gave examples of interactions with their faculty in which faculty members shared their professional expertise and provided feedback on the most suitable courses to take in upcoming semesters and degree programs that better aligned with the student's career goals. Camille shared:

> *We had a couple of back and forth in the emails, but you can just tell even through his emails that he was very attentive. He was just well versed on like, the pathway, right. And so, he was able to give me very specific feedback in response to how my plan should look.*

Providing feedback to students gave faculty members the opportunity to validate these women's previous experiences and the knowledge they bring to the learning space.

The women discussed how appreciative they were when their faculty affirmed their academic abilities, reminded them that they were capable of completing the task at hand, and welcomed discussions of their previous workplace and college experiences. Esmeralda shared:

> *We were talking and she mentioned that I was a good student. And that made me feel good. Because I thought I wasn't making A's…And I wanted to have higher expectations for myself. Her saying that, you know, you're a good student made me feel like okay, she feels like my grades are pretty good considering like all the coursework we got going on. So, I appreciate it.*

Mo also described a situation where her faculty affirmed her as a capable student. She voiced, "one of my instructors got on me. He was like, 'look I know you can do this.' Acknowledging that he knew I can do the work, that was very meaningful to me." Faith articulated that she appreciated her faculty maintaining their course standards and holding her accountable.

Providing feedback to students gave faculty members the opportunity to validate these women's

previous experiences and the knowledge they bring to the learning space. Being able to contribute to class discussion about their past and having those experiences be welcomed in the learning space was appreciated.

Throughout the data, the responsiveness of their faculty was described by the Black female adult learners as meaningful. Kelly, Lydia, and Camille commended their faculty for their timely responses and repeatedly expressed appreciation for receiving email replies so promptly. Camille stated:

> *I emailed him and it was like at night. Some type of like, you know, after hours. And I didn't expect a response back. But he did respond back super quick. I like really appreciate that because you didn't have to do that but thank you.*

Faculty responsiveness was associated with respect and value for one of the women. Lydia felt that faculty respected and valued her voice when they responded in a timely manner. This is echoed by Kelly, who shared, "I have not had one professor, one administrator that hasn't reached back to me in 24 hours…they reach out."

Faculty responsiveness, feedback, validation, and faculty-initiated interactions were described as meaningful to the women's educational experiences. They also shared their expectations of faculty members. Many of the women stated their experiences with high school teachers and professors at their previous college shaped what their current expectations are now that they are attending the community college. Kelly also admitted that television in her childhood influenced what she expected of her future college faculty. She shared:

> *I mean, it may sound crazy but TV. A Different World, you know you grow up seeing those kinds of things and you like, yeah, these professors are about that. Like Professor*

> *Colonel, he…he was serious, but he cared…So it's kind of what you grow up seeing and thinking (Kelly, Interview).*

The women expect their faculty to be communicative and reliable, honoring their advertised office hours. They expect faculty support, clear and concise communication of expectations, and a detailed syllabus that helps structure and guide the course. Esmeralda expects her community college faculty to get to know their adult students better. She explained, "I expect faculty to teach us and try to figure out how they can help serve us adult students because we are not just students." Likewise, Kelly discussed differences in class dynamics. She wants and expects faculty to interact with their online students in an as engaging way as they do with their in-class students. Kelly shared, "so if you're gonna be able to give your classroom a smiling face or some motivation, I feel like I expect the same thing to be done for your hybrid students."

Safe Spaces

The women in this study voiced how having nurturing, kind, supportive, understanding faculty created a space which was meaningful to their educational experience. They want faculty who are relatable and exhibit care. They want a learning space free from pressure to work harder than their counterparts in an effort to dispel negative stereotypes about Black women. They want a space where they do not have to always be *strong*.

Esmeralda described a space where she was able to be a better student. She stated:

> *I've had an experience with one of the staff during the lab that they were very nurturing and kind and understanding. And wasn't putting a lot of pressure on me or my peers. And it was refreshing, like, it was like I can relax…Yeah, that was a positive, like just having one, that one instructor like, let me show you how to do this. Let me explain it to you. And let me not bombard you with this slew of questions (Esmeralda, Interview).*

The women described understanding as a desirable characteristic of their faculty. As adult learners with varying life circumstances and responsibilities, faculty members who can understand that life exists beyond the walls of the classroom were much appreciated. Faith shared:

> *I think as an instructor, you have to be mindful that people's experiences, their personal and their educational and professional experiences are gonna vary right? And unless you're able to or have good discernment, I feel like sometimes you miss those small nuances that really could be a grounding point to connecting students who maybe otherwise would not have that connection.*

Most of the women spoke about the need for faculty to have a better understanding of the complex lives of their students. Lydia's statement summarizes the sentiments shared by the women: "To me it's just a whole other step to just teaching…it's more than just showing up and this is the material, here!" Being a relatable and caring faculty member was discussed as meaningful. They valued faculty who displayed care about them not only as students but as multifaceted individuals. Camille explained, "when they come across as relatable…it just makes it feel like okay, there's a real person on the other side the screen. And it's not just this person hiding behind the title of instructor."

Further analysis of the data revealed the well-being of these Black female adult learners and the association with being *strong*. Kelly's viewpoint was shared by others; she stated:

> *Automatically we're looked at as the Strong Black Woman. We're not just Black women; we're a Strong Black Woman. You know, so you don't have it? Oh, you'll get it. You'll get it. You know because you guys are strong. You can endure it all.*

In her reflective journal, Esmeralda shared how she feels Black students are "always in Survivor Mode." She continued this theme in her follow-up interview, stating that she was "surviving but not triumphing" and she explained how students like herself can be overlooked because they are getting good grades. Esmeralda shared, "and because I'm doing okay, they're like, she's fine when that's not the case."

Most of the women mentioned trying to dispel negative stereotypes about Black women or feeling as though they must work harder than their counterparts and the resulting stress and pressure. In the follow-up interview, Lydia shared:

> *I think society is shifting but I think there are still a lot of people who believe that the Black woman is in this box and she stays in this box. And I think it's still a surprise to a lot of people when a Black woman achieves greatness in something academically. So, I think sometimes I try maybe subconsciously to counteract that.*

Some of the women talked about having the added pressure and the expectation of always being *strong*. Camille commented:

> *So, I get that it's not going to be easy but give me something that is going to keep me healthy and intact and fueled and motivated. You know what I'm saying? Like take care of me on this journey also. So, I'm not sacrificing myself for the sake of the cause. I don't wanna do that because I still have to be sane for myself. I still gotta be sane for the kids…so I can't be the sacrifice.*

These women want a learning environment where their well-being is not compromised, where they don't have to subject themselves to always exhibiting strength, and where they are free to be vulnerable.

Particularly, spaces on campus where these women saw other Black women felt safe for them. Camille and Kelly explained that they are able to interact with faculty who look like them without reservation, without concerns about their body language, without fear of being judged. Camille boldly stated:

> *But I feel like I can approach another Black male or female instructor, faculty, or staff without a lot of thought. You know what I'm saying. I don't have to think about my mannerisms, my tone, my inflection, my dialect, none of that. I don't have to do that; I can just be.*

Mo, Kelly, and Camille described feelings of belongingness and motivation on the campus of ECC due to seeing Black female staff members and students who looked like them. The commonality, the sense of connectedness, the possible shared experiences, the smiles and head nods, it all signified a space where these Black women felt interlinked, included, and inspired.

"Having those experiences just make you feel seen": Significance of Faculty-Student Interaction

The women in the study were asked how they saw the importance of interacting with their faculty, which directly aligns with research question two. The data presented described the significance of faculty-student interactions for these Black female adult learners. While each woman expressed that interacting with faculty was significant, it is necessary to highlight their individual responses to observe their unique viewpoint on faculty-student interactions.

Mo shared:

> *I think that they're very important…So I feel like if they know your your work ethic or work style and they are familiar with you, it helps you in the long run. Not necessarily*

with, you know grades but just having that established rapport with them. So, I definitely think that it's important to establish a connection of some type.

Esmeralda shared:

I think the relationship is very important. I feel like if you have a relationship with your advisor, your faculty, you are more likely to confide in them. And have them offer solutions from their experience. You're more likely to trust them, you're more likely to approach them about coursework that you're struggling with. And you can, you would be more likely to trust that they're going to assist you in ways that provide you resources that will help you. So, it's important for your academic, my personally, my academic success to have a good relationship with your advisor or your instructors.

Kelly shared:

It's important, it's important because even if you are a straight A student, you turn in your work every Tuesday night, every Sunday…that rapport. And I think that's with anything. Think about this school, like the lady at the grocery store, like you build that rapport.

Lydia shared:

I do find it important to have a relationship because say you don't speak to your professor the entire semester until like the last few weeks. They're gonna be like okay, where have you been? Who are you? Are you just trying to get a good grade, is that why you're coming to me? Do you really want help? Do you really want to know this? So, from that standpoint, I do find it important to have some kind of relationship but it just depends on the professor at the end of the day.

Camille shared:

> *Oh, extremely important. One of the changes that I have made is to be more intentional about actually building those relationships with my faculty members…I'm just making sure that line of communication is open but also, it's a healthy flow back and forth so that I'm being intentional about, you know, whatever I can do and what I can control to start this relationship.*

Lastly, Faith shared:

> *I think it's extremely important, especially when you're talking about as I mentioned, I'm an adult learner. I have a whole world going on outside of this, you know. So, but I also think that you can't just think that that relationship is going to be fostered on their side…But I do think it's very important. I think that building strong foundations not only just for, for the course of study that you're in but after, right? You never know how you're going to be needed as a resource or who you're going to be needing as a resource. Those relationships are very important.*

The women in this study shared how interacting and building relationships with faculty influenced the various aspects of who they are—the student, the professional, the person.

The Student

Meaningful faculty-student interactions influenced the Black female adult learners' academic development. Esmeralda explained that interacting with her faculty was important because it increased her academic self-confidence. She shared:

> *It made me want to learn the course material but like it made me more attentive. It made me less nervous, so I was actually able to, you know, be confident in the information she*

> *was giving me. I wasn't as tense and stressed and worried…the information she provided my brain absorbed well (Esmeralda, Interview).*

Faculty providing feedback was previously described as meaningful and Esmeralda emphasized that having a good relationship with her faculty member allowed her to become more receptive to the feedback that was given. She continued:

> *And I was, you know when it was time to give feedback, I was confident that even if I didn't have the correct information that I wouldn't have negative repercussions, like it wouldn't be a negative. Any negative feedback, it will be constructive feedback. And I'll be more open to receive it, you know, to apply to future labs and tests and stuff (Esmeralda, Interview).*

Increasing academic self-confidence, increasing motivation, and increasing effort were all results of meaningful faculty-student interactions.

Mo explained why faculty-student interactions were important to her experience: "so, I definitely think they're important or they're needed to kind of give us you know or give me a boost towards my long-term goals." Motivation was repeatedly mentioned by the women as a reason they felt interacting with faculty was significant. While they mentioned other individuals in their lives who serve as motivators, Faith, Kelly, and Mo shared that faculty played a major role in motivating them during their educational journey. Kelly shared her perspective:

> *Like, to be able to have that because I honestly don't see without that interaction being able to just feel strong enough to keep going forward. And I don't know, you know, if that says something about me. It's just the fact that I am coming back in the game after 20 years. But the interaction, the healthy interaction does give you encouragement to be like,*

> *alright come on December 15. I mean, let me knock this semester out. So, we can start fresh in January. So, the interaction, it's been encouragement for me.*

Increased motivation often translated into increased effort for some of the women. Lydia confessed that her level of effort has been influenced by a faculty member. She stated, "but on the flipside, if they're very engaged, they're very into it, they seem like they're gonna be helpful, they really care, that makes me care more." Similarly, Kelly discussed how engaged faculty who take initiative in interacting with students can inspire students to connect with the course on a deeper level. She noted:

> *It makes you want to interact more…it made you want to do more. Like oh, you actually care. Like, you're giving me more information than any other professor has given me. And this is at that point in time in the beginning of my continued learning. So, like yeah, it made you want to do your work (Kelly, Interview).*

Meaningful faculty-student interactions propelled the women. This was evident in Faith's statement, "…more meaningful situations led me to really look to put out my best work." Camille's thoughts best summarize how faculty-student interactions can shape a student's educational journey:

> *But when they're things like a relationship or somebody being super responsive or my faculty, my instructor being super responsive. When that happens, it just really brings about a sense of ease to an already, you know, could be challenge of trying to really manage a full-time school schedule…there's just one less thing I have to focus on and worry about. And it just makes the overall experience to me better.*

The Professional

Kelly and Camille discussed the value of faculty in regard to their career development. They viewed their faculty as knowledgeable professionals in their respective fields who could provide guidance in navigating student career and educational goals. Kelly stated:

> *She did speak with me and asked what my endgame was. So, when I told her I wanted my BA in marketing, she helped me switch out what I was going for…when I described to her what I wanted to do, she was kind of like…you can do that but what you sound like you want to do, you don't want to stop here. You want to take it onto the next step.*

Similarly, Camille discussed at length how important building relationships with faculty was to her growth as a professional:

> *I'm like every one of the instructors that we come into contact with throughout our educational career, they have a certain level of expertise or otherwise they wouldn't be our instructor, right? And so, I think that it would be a great opportunity to be able to kind of understand more of like outside of just teaching us the content that they're expected to teach us, like what are some other possibilities or ways that we can draw from the value that they bring to the table? You know what I'm saying, like what other ways can we interact that might help us to better set us up for our future? To connect even our outside lives, you know, things that we do that may not be so obvious, instead of having to kind of dig for the treasure…I'm like it should be a little more accessible.*

Camille explained how beneficial it would be for faculty to see their value beyond the curriculum and how influential they could be in furthering the career and personal aspirations of their students.

The Person

Meaningful faculty-student interactions were described as influencing not only academic and career development but also personal development. Faith reflected on the connectedness of growth:

> *And I mean, of course, you know you've got those things that just only applies to this space right. But the dialogue surrounding that conversation for instance, "you make careless mistakes," I note that to my personal life. You know, like where are you missing? Are you missing anything right now? Focus for a second! Pay attention! Did you…is this an oversight on your behalf? And then, how are you communicating better? All these different things. It's yes, about the thing but also that impact you just on a larger scope. I think just your professional, your personal, your educational, they're all tied together.*

Camille also felt that faculty members have untapped opportunities for engaging with students that could develop into a "much more robust type of relationship or interaction…I can see the value and how it could take place in my real life." She went on to say, "So everything about what I'm doing now, it's not just to get a degree, not just to check a box, everything is very meaningful, strategic, you know, and intentional. So, for me, it can really change some things."

Notably, Faith discussed how interacting with her faculty in a positive and meaningful way allowed her to reflect and think about how she can pay it forward. She shared:

> *Also, to be the person, you know, we talked about earlier about, the self-reflection. To be the person I want to see in those spaces…I'm going to become that, that motivation to really pick up the baton, to carry that baton to the next level (Faith, Interview).*

Mo, Esmeralda, Kelly, Lydia, Camille, and Faith shared how influential meaningful interactions with faculty can be. They spoke about the complexities of their lives and the significance of faculty-student interactions in their experiences inside and outside the classroom.

"My peers are basically like faculty and my advisor": Meaningful Peer Interactions and Relationships

A final theme emerged from data collected from two of the women, Esmeralda and Kelly. They shared experiences that demonstrated the significance of peer interactions in the learning space, which aligns with the secondary question of research question two. Esmeralda, a health science major, talked about how important her peers have been in her educational journey. She described the frequent peer study sessions and her comfort with engaging with her peers. This is a stark difference in her comfort level engaging with her faculty. Esmeralda shared:

> *I confide in my peers. I confide in my peers…Yeah, so me and my peer, we've studied. Like yesterday, I studied with one of my peers and it started off in a big group and it ended up with just me and her. And we just talked about what are like our struggles with this coursework. And we kind of was like…well, I do this. And I'm like…I did this. And we kind of like bounce off each other's suggestions that help us study better.*

In her interview, Kelly described a student advisor who worked alongside her faculty member. She recalled this student also being an adult learner, which she found useful because this student could relate to the experience of being a student balancing multiple life responsibilities. Kelly shared that her faculty responded to her email and also offered a "secondary person who's also a student who is doing what you're doing. And they may can help you in way that I can't." Both of these women saw the value in their interactions with peers.

Kelly went on to say, “great thing I think about a student advisor is you’re a little timid. Sometimes your professor has all these letters behind their name…so when you have someone that’s an adult learner, like oh, I can do this too then!” Like Kelly, Esmeralda explained her peer relationships were significant because they made her feel like she belonged; she felt these relationships created a sense of community among peers in her program, which lessened feelings of isolation. She shared, “I felt like do belong. Just because of the interactions I get from my classmates. I feel like I belong on that level, like on a peer level.” As she emphasized, peers also influenced Esmeralda’s academic self-confidence:

> *Um, my peers have shaped my academic development…Having these different relationships with my peers and being able to confide in them and being able to study with them, it gave, it gives me more confidence when I go to take a test. And it gives me more peace when I hear they feel the same way that I do. I don’t feel like I’m in this by myself. They understand, like, aye, I get it.*

For Kelly and Esmeralda, peer interactions and building peer relationships served as meaningful experiences and positively contributed to their overall educational experience at Eastern Community College.

Chapter Summary

The chapter began with detailed descriptions of the six Black female adult learners who participated in this study. They shared their voices and experiences through reflective journal entries and two interviews. Data revealed four emergent themes and subthemes which aligned with the study’s research questions and theoretical framework. In the following chapter, the study’s findings are discussed; additionally, recommendations and conclusions are presented.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This case study examined faculty-student interactions perceived as meaningful by Black female adult learners at the community college. The following research questions guided the study of meaningful interactions: How do Black female adult learners describe their meaningful interactions with community college faculty? How do Black female adult learners describe the significance of faculty-student interactions and other learning space interactions? Black Feminist Thought served as the theoretical framework, with validation theory as a conceptual influence, in this study of Black female adult learners and their interactions with faculty members.

This chapter begins with a detailed discussion of the connections between the study's key findings and the literature. Next, implications for theory are presented, along with recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. The chapter concludes with recommendations for Black female adult learners and a chapter summary.

Summary of Findings

Through interviews and reflective journals, the women in this study described their experiences as Black female adult learners and their perceptions of meaningful interactions with faculty. The data revealed two key findings: intentional effort is necessary for meaningful faculty-student interaction and Black female adult learners want more from their faculty. The findings are discussed in detail in alignment with Black Feminist Thought and validation theory.

Finding One: Intentional Effort is Necessary for Meaningful Faculty-Student Interaction

A key finding that emerged from the data was that Black female adult learners believe that while faculty-student interactions are a mutual dialectical process, faculty bear the responsibility in their role as faculty members to initiate interactions with students. This finding supports Rendón's (1994) validation theory, which places the responsibility on the faculty and

institution to initiate interactions and engagement with students. Notably, the women in this study also talked about student accountability in faculty-student interaction. They emphasized their need for faculty to create a space where students feel comfortable approaching faculty members. How Black female adult learners describe their desired learning spaces will be discussed later in the chapter.

Black Female Adult Learners Want Faculty to Initiate Interactions

Surprise and appreciation were the feelings described by the women when their faculty reached out to them first. The women were asked about initiating interactions between faculty and students during the follow-up interviews. They believed faculty should initiate interactions with students. Providing office hours was commonly stated as the primary way faculty initiated engaging with their students. The women talked about the significance of faculty engaging beyond being told when faculty office hours are held. This finding is further supported by recent studies (Hallett et al., 2020, Hotchkins et al., 2021) that point to the value of faculty initiating conversations about academic progress, academic or career plans, and discussing students' academic or social needs. Research emphasizes faculty members taking responsibility for being proactive and engaging with students regularly as validating agents (Dika et al., 2023; Rendón, 1994, 2002).

Kelly recalled her faculty member who contacted students in his course about meeting in person to get to know them better in a meet-and-greet session. Lydia mentioned her appreciation when her faculty member contacted her about her academic progress. Mo shared that she felt her faculty member cared when he contacted her about her coursework. These instances were described as meaningful. The women valued their faculty "taking the time" to interact with them without the women having to reach out first.

Renner and Skursha's (2023) recent study concluded that adult students likely benefit from intentional outreach and faculty initiating interactions. The Black female adult learners in this case study want more emails, more informative video correspondences, more in-person or virtual meetings, and more intentionality from their faculty members. They want more than available office hours. They want faculty to take the time to initiate meaningful interactions that will positively influence their educational experience.

The Student in Faculty-Student Interaction

The data revealed that students also play a critical role in this process. Mo, Lydia, Camille, and Faith shared their thoughts on the student's responsibility in engaging with faculty members. They emphasized their view that although faculty should initiate interactions, it is also necessary for students to communicate and engage with faculty.

Mo shared her perspective that once the faculty member initiates interactions and opens the lines of communication, the student should be held accountable for reciprocating effective communication to address any questions, concerns, or other discussion topics. Recent studies on faculty-student interactions (Smith & Robertson, 2021) and adult learner engagement (Spitzig & Renner, 2022) support this finding and maintain that students have a responsibility to engage with or reach out to faculty members. Research indicates that it is essential for students to "acknowledge their role in their learning" (Smith & Robertson, 2021, p. 875). Camille also shared the importance of students advocating for themselves by contacting their faculty.

The Black female adult learners in this study were aware of the varying influences on their interactions with faculty, including past experiences, assumptions, identities, and course delivery methods (O'Keeffe, 2013). Despite these factors, they viewed students as active agents in the faculty-student dialectical process and desired spaces where they felt comfortable to

initiate interactions. The women recognized and understood the importance of and the need for student-initiated interactions as a way for students to demonstrate responsibility for their academic progression.

Finding Two: Black Female Adult Learners Want More from Their Faculty

The second finding is a powerful indicator of Black female adult learner engagement and desire for success. The six women who participated in this study want to have meaningful interactions and build relationships with their faculty. They want more from their faculty than just course material. They discussed the influences faculty can have on personal and career development. Notably, Camille and Faith shared how their faculty often miss the opportunity to connect with students that could further their career goals or provide a space where students can grow as individuals.

Each woman described the significance and importance of faculty-student interaction. They spoke about increased effort and motivation as reasons why interacting with their faculty members is important. Additionally, meaningful faculty interactions can positively influence their academic self-confidence and overall educational experience. The women see the value in building connections and relationships with faculty, which can foster academic, personal, and career gains and benefits. They expressed awareness of faculty's influential role in their experiences inside and outside of the classroom and their desire to establish a rapport with their faculty. This finding will be discussed through the lens of the three relevant elements of Black Feminist Thought: voice, knowledge validation, and safe spaces.

Voice

Dialogue and voice, a key element of Black Feminist Thought presented by Collins (1989), is most relevant to the examination of faculty-student interactions among community

college faculty and Black female adult learners. The theoretical framework asserts that dialogue and voice provide a means to share experiences and build connections. Black women can be validated through dialectical exchanges. Black women can be heard through dialectical exchanges. Black women's experiences can be acknowledged through dialectical exchanges (Collins, 1989, 2000).

Faculty-student interactions represent an opportunity for dialectical exchange between faculty and students. An exchange can be defined as the process of giving and receiving; thus, the voice of students is a necessary component is this process. The voices of Black women are bold, soft, high octaves, low octaves, boisterous, meek, and anywhere in between; regardless, their voices are a valuable contribution to any conversation.

Black Female Adult Learners Want to Be Their Authentic Selves

The six women in this study desire to interact with their faculty in a way that allows them to be their unique and authentic selves. They simply want to *be*. The women do not want their passionate voice inflections to be misjudged and perceived as aggressive. They simply want their passionate voice inflections to be seen as passion. Kelly described herself as someone who uses her hands when she talks. However, she also shared that she believes some faculty will misinterpret her hand gestures. She elaborated that while some faculty may misread her body language during interactions, she tries to not "code switch" and presents herself as authentically as possible when communicating. Code switching is "switching between two dialects or way of pronouncing words" according to Cambridge Dictionary (2024).

Code switching was also referenced by Camille, who admitted to altering how she interacts with her faculty members based on various factors, such as race and gender. Despite feeling compelled to modify her delivery when interacting and engaging with faculty, Camille

truly desires learning spaces where she can be her dynamic, authentic self. She wants to bring her personality, intellect, wit, entrepreneurial knowledge, all the layers of what make up Camille to the learning space and to her interactions with faculty. Camille and the other women's sentiments are supported by previous studies that grapple with the scrutiny placed on Black women's communication practices and Black women choosing to conform to the dominant social norms of speech to self-preserve in academic and professional spaces (Johnson et al., 2022; Myers, 2020; Woodson, 2020).

Faith also shared wanting to bring her "full" self into the classroom and faculty-student relationships. These women discussed wanting spaces where their vernacular, tone, body language, and non-verbal cues are respected and welcomed without judgement. Similarly, Esmeralda discussed wanting to reach out to her faculty and wanting to engage in class, yet she fears being perceived as less intelligent than her White peers. She desires a space where she can voice her thoughts and opinions whether they are correct, incorrect, or indifferent. She desires spaces free from unnecessary pressure to always be right (West et al., 2021). Esmeralda simply wants trustworthy faculty who genuinely care about her and create a space where she can feel comfortable using her voice.

While these women see the value in meaningful faculty-student interactions, they also see the value in who they define themselves to be and desire spaces where they can interact with their faculty without reservations (Spates et al., 2020). Kelly described Black women as "superheroes without capes" and shared that being a Black woman gives her confidence when interacting with faculty. She spoke about the societal stereotypes of Black women, such as the "angry Black woman" and emphasized that she uses her identities as Black and a woman to

uplift her and build confidence. She takes this confidence with her when she engages with her faculty (Williams et al., 2020).

Although these women discussed their desire to interact and engage with their faculty while maintaining who they are as individuals, they often feel as though they cannot be their authentic selves. This change in voice raises the question, why do these Black female adult learners believe they need to modify how they interact with their faculty? Fear of being negatively perceived by faculty and peers and negative stereotypes perpetuated within society at large were discussed as likely reasons by some of the women.

The findings of this case study aligned with Williams and Lewis's (2021) research, which explored the gendered racial identity development of Black women and discussed how Black women were hyperaware of how they present themselves to others and the need to resist negative stereotypes associated with Black women. For example, Esmeralda, Kelly, and Faith talked about Black women being perceived as "loud," "angry," and speaking in such a way that is deemed "too Black." Ironically, Lydia shared that she believes Black women are not heard in most spaces; loud yet unheard.

The women had an "awareness of stereotypical perceptions" historically associated with Black women and did not want to portray themselves in ways that perpetuated negative and inaccurate depictions of Black women (Neal-Jackson, 2020, p. 318). There is a tug of war between how much of their true selves they can display without being judged and perceived negatively. This finding supports the work of West and colleagues (2021) who addressed the challenges Black women in higher education face with authentic self-presentation and conforming to dominant group societal norms (Davis, 2018; Leath et al., 2021; Leath et al., 2023).

Influences on Black Female Adult Learners' Faculty-Student Interactions.

Influences on faculty-student interactions go beyond faculty-related factors and can include student identities and experiences. Lydia shared that the way in which she interacts with faculty can be determined by how faculty members approach students and set the tone. Similarly, Mo stated that she respectfully interacts with faculty based on the faculty member's demeanor and not on factors associated with her Black identity.

However, the other women shared that they pay close attention to how they interact with faculty of a different race or ethnic group. As previously noted, these women stated that they minimize hand gestures and have an awareness of their tone as to not be perceived negatively by their faculty (Williams & Lewis, 2021). For Esmeralda, Kelly, Camille, and Faith, their Black female identities were believed to influence their faculty-student interactions. In addition to race, gender also influenced how most of the women interacted with faculty. They expressed wanting interactions with faculty of a different gender that ensured respect and occurred in appropriate or comfortable settings, such as with office doors open (Cohen, 2018). Notably, Lydia shared that she finds herself being more reserved and has a heightened sense of awareness when interacting with faculty of a different gender.

The women discussed adult identity and its positive influences on interacting with faculty. Most of them described how being an adult learner increased their confidence when communicating with faculty members. Their previous professional experiences in the workplace, such as written communication through emails and interacting with supervisors or colleagues, positively shaped how they approached engaging with their community college faculty. The women who had previously attended college also spoke about their experiences with former faculty and how those experiences influenced their expectations of faculty and how they interact

with their current faculty members at ECC. To this point, Rabourn and colleagues' (2018) study found that adult student identity did influence engaging with faculty and peers, with adult learners having a positive perception of the quality of those interactions.

Other influential factors on how Black female adult learners engage with faculty members included past experiences and students' regularly used communication patterns. As previously noted, self-advocacy was discussed as reason for student-initiated interactions (Gaines, 2024; García-Louis et al., 2023; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2016). Consistent with the literature, Mo and Camille expressed the need to advocate for themselves by asking questions of their faculty and reaching out when necessary.

Mo goes on to explain that experiences during high school prompted her to become more vocal about matters concerning her education. Kelly also shared that she is naturally communicative and will always be the student to email her teachers with questions and comments. These statements show how a student's tendency to engage in dialogue can shape interactions with faculty members.

The women shared how they had not previously thought about their interactions with faculty in depth prior to participating in the study. Reflecting on who they are, their experiences, and how they engage with faculty brought a sense of awareness of the multiple components of the faculty-student interaction process. When examining faculty-student interactions it is essential to consider the varying factors that can influence how students interact and engage in the learning space (O'Keeffe, 2013).

Benefits of Diversified Faculty and Campus Agents.

From representation to empowerment, Black community college faculty and staff are significant to the experiences of Black female adult learners. Mo, Kelly, and Camille recalled

feeling a sense of belonging on their college campus when they saw other Black people, especially Black women. They described Black women at the college welcome desk, in the library, and at the bookstore who made them feel as though the college valued their cultural background and who made them have a "grandma, mama feeling." Kelly also described having an African faculty member with whom she instantly felt a sense of connection and shared community. Some of the women stated how they had never had a Black faculty member at Eastern Community College. However, seeing Black staff members made them feel welcomed by their campus community.

Camille talked about feeling more comfortable interacting with Black faculty members because of the likelihood of shared commonalities. She described feeling understood and seen by those who share her Black identity and similar life experiences (Hannon et al., 2016). Kelly described how a Black faculty member would likely understand her body language and relate her mannerisms and hand gestures to a family member, lessening the chances of her being misunderstood and judged. These women discussed how the presence of Black women on campus motivated them to excel. Camille went on to share that her experiences with Black faculty increased her motivation, as those faculty members held her to a high standard of academic achievement.

Neville and Parker's (2017) research on interactions with Black faculty supports this study's finding that Black faculty members positively influence Black students' educational experience. The women in this case study described increased academic motivation, a heightened sense of belongingness, and feeling welcomed and valued as results of seeing and interacting with Black faculty and staff at ECC. Faculty of color provide several benefits on the community college campus and in the learning space. Faculty of color can foster a sense of comfort and

reduce anxiety and fears for students of color. Faculty members that mirror the diverse student body can promote social integration through visibility and relatable experiences. Role modeling is another benefit for students of color that a diversified faculty can contribute to the student experience. This finding is consistent with previous studies that assert faculty of color possess unique experiences, perspectives, and ideas that are valuable and contribute to creating an inclusive campus culture (Cross & Carman, 2021; Hund, 2020).

Knowledge Validation

Validating and acknowledging Black women's lived experiences as knowledge is the second element of Black Feminist Thought that is relevant to the examination of meaningful faculty-student interactions among Black female adult learners. Voice and knowledge validation are intricately interwoven and through dialectical exchanges faculty can emphasize learners as co-creators of knowledge (Collins, 1989; Freire & Ramos, 1970).

Within the faculty-student relationship, faculty members can interact and engage with students in a way that validates who they are as unique individuals and contributors to the learning community. hooks' (2015) feminist pedagogy asserts that lived experiences constitute knowledge and the criticality of faculty eliminating an "all-knowing" position in the learning space. Black female adult learners often bring a wealth of life, professional, and educational experiences into the learning space.

Black Female Adult Learners Want to be Validated

The six Black female adult learners who shared their voices and perspectives about faculty-student interactions described how meaningful specific feedback and validating statements about their academic capabilities from faculty were to their educational experience. Faculty validation can take many forms, such as frequent interactions, welcoming student voice

and opinions, motivating students as capable learners, acknowledging student success, and sharing expertise to assist students in development through personalized feedback (Rendón, 1994). The women in this study discussed how they desire feedback beyond generic responses and appreciated being held to high academic standards.

Faculty Feedback.

This study found that thorough feedback is significant to academic and career development. Particularly, Mo expressed how she needs specific feedback that addresses areas of improvement and her strengths as she seeks to enhance her academic skills and knowledge. She further explained that generic "good job, Mo" comments on her work are not useful to her growth as a student.

Kelly recalled her faculty member providing detailed feedback on her discussion posts. She went on to note that it made her feel he actually cared about what she had to say. Providing specific feedback and engaging with students' work fosters value. Faculty feedback can empower students to believe that their thoughts, perspectives, and opinions are valuable and can facilitate their growth and development. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Ajayi et al., 2021; Fong et al., 2021; Vetter et al., 2019) emphasizing the use and value of specific, constructive feedback.

Faculty are commonly in a position that can shape a student's motivation and academic self-confidence. Faculty often enter the learning space with varying real-world experiences and career field expertise that is likely useful to the development of students. The women in this study described feedback on career aspirations, career pathways, ways to improve academic challenges, specific practices students do well, strategies to prepare for assessments, and other various critiques of coursework as meaningful interactions with their faculty members.

Faculty Affirmations.

Affirming statements from faculty were a valuable and meaningful interaction among Black female adult learners. Mo, Esmeralda, and Lydia described specific incidences in which their faculty members stated they knew the students could do the work. Their faculty affirmed the women as capable of the task at hand. Faculty members intentionally communicated to these women their academic standard for the course and their belief that these students had the academic ability to meet that standard. Multiple studies have explored the influence of validating and affirming practices of faculty and suggest these types of interactions positively influence a student's educational experience, career self-efficacy, and motivation (Kitchen, 2021, 2023; Wang et al., 2023). For instance, Faith recalled her faculty member not allowing her to do the bare minimum in his course and encouraged her to increase her effort.

These women expressed how affirming statements strengthened their desire to succeed. Affirming students can likely increase academic self-confidence. Faculty can create a learning space that promotes academic success, emphasizes high scholastic standards, and affirms students as valuable and capable thinkers. The significance of faculty communicating their academic expectations and adhering to the course standards supports Baber's (2018) research emphasizing the importance of faculty validating students' capabilities. The Black female adult learners described themselves as capable of completing their degree programs. They also shared how meaningful being positively affirmed by their faculty was to their confidence levels.

Safe Spaces

Lastly, creating and cultivating a space where Black women may feel safe is the third element of Black Feminist Thought that closely aligns with meaningful faculty-student interactions. Safe spaces likely encompass voice and knowledge validation. Spaces where Black

women can share their voices, share their experiences, foster connections, and build relationships while being validated, affirmed, and valued are described as safe spaces (Collins, 1989, 2000). Interactions between faculty and students are spaces that can emphasize authenticity and accountability and spaces that can emphasize validation and value.

Black Female Adult Learners Want to Be Vulnerable

The women in this study described wanting spaces where they could lay down the burdens and pressures of being a *Strong Black Woman*. Esmeralda shared a desire for a learning environment that allows her to be vulnerable, a space where she can feel a range of emotions. She wants to be viewed as and treated like a human. She goes on to say, "I deserve to be cared for; I deserve to have someone have concern about me." Esmeralda expressed her frustration with constantly feeling she must be stronger and endure more than her White counterparts.

Similarly, Kelly wants a learning environment that eliminates the assumption of being able to bear it all. She believes Black women are often expected to be *strong* and capable of enduring any challenges they encounter. These women's sentiments expressed a desire to have faculty who create spaces that acknowledge their humanness, that welcome their moments of despair and trials in addition to the perceived assumptions of extraordinary strength and resiliency. What are the costs of carrying the burdens of feeling as though you must be strong? What is the cost of internalizing stereotypical images of Black women?

Camille shared her desire to keep her sanity intact. She wants to pursue her educational aspirations; however, she and the other women do not want to compromise their well-being to do so. She voiced needing to be taken care of during her journey—emotionally taken care of. Her sentiments are echoed in Donovan and West's (2015) study examining the relationship between Black college women's mental health and internalizing the *Strong Black Woman* stereotypical

image. Camille shared that she did not want to be a martyr which points to the literature portraying the *Strong Black Woman* as self-sacrificing (Watson & Hunter, 2016; West et al., 2016).

These women want spaces where their emotions are safeguarded and not overlooked. Esmeralda discussed how being academically successful as demonstrated through grades can result in being forgotten, leaving her feeling unseen. She further explained, "I just want instructors to just do better because there's some students like myself that will get looked over and that are being looked over. And because I'm doing okay, they're like, she's fine when that's not the case." This finding aligns with previous studies that Black women are often perceived as possessing extraordinary strength; this creates spaces where Black women do not feel safe to share their genuine emotions and vulnerability (Davis, 2015; Nelson et al., 2016). The *Strong Black Woman* stereotype equates Black women to the societal norms of men, "rational, rather than emotional," relegating them to containing their emotions (Nelson et al., 2016, p. 557).

The Black female adult learners in this study want a learning space where they can remove the perceived mask of being the *Strong Black Woman*. They want faculty to look beyond passing grades and hear, acknowledge, and attend to students' concerns, frustrations, and realities. These women want a space where their well-being is not jeopardized for the sake of earning their degrees. They want spaces where faculty see their humanness, spaces where they can display vulnerability and their emotive selves.

Black Female Adult Learners Want Faculty Who Are…

The six Black female adult learners in this study described specific faculty characteristics they felt were meaningful to their educational experience and also shared how they expect faculty to show up in the learning space. Their past experiences—including from the workplace,

former faculty at other colleges and universities, and even interactions with teachers in high school—shaped their expectations of faculty members at ECC. These experiences were both positive and negative. Previous experiences left lasting impressions on these women and played a significant role in the type of faculty member they believed was meaningful to their educational journey.

Faculty Characteristics.

The women shared that they want faculty who exhibit care, are understanding, and are relatable. Esmeralda noted that in her experiences, faculty seem not to care, and they only teach the material. She and the other women want faculty who care and are concerned about the other aspects of a student's life. Previous studies have found that students view faculty as caring when they initiate interactions, are willing to take time to engage and extend themselves, build connections, gain an understanding of student needs, and validate students' knowledge and academic capabilities (Edenfield & McBrayer, 2021; Erskine-Meusa, 2017; Kim et al., 2023; Means & Pyne, 2017). Research has shown that caring faculty can increase student motivation and enhance the student experience (Roksa & Whitley, 2017).

This study's findings also suggest that being an understanding faculty member is a desirable characteristic. These women expressed the importance of faculty recognizing that adult students are more than just students. They want faculty who understand the multiple layers of who they are as individuals, mothers, daughters, employees, business owners, community volunteers, students, and teachers. Thus, it is essential that faculty view adult learners as dynamic and understand their varying life roles and responsibilities, which will likely influence how they engage with the learning space.

Faculty members are individuals with varying backgrounds, experiences, and expertise. Camille shared how she wants relatable faculty who appropriately share aspects of themselves that connect with their students (Brookfield, 2015). She went on to ask the rhetorical question, "who's hiding behind the tile of instructor?" Likewise, Faith talked about missed opportunities for faculty and students to build relationships due to a lack of relatedness from her faculty. Desiring relatable faculty was also evident, with Esmeralda saying she wants faculty to come down to her level and meet her where she is. She noted that many of her faculty are in similar stages of their adult lives, raising families and balancing their careers with other responsibilities.

Intimidation was discussed as a factor that can influence faculty-student interaction. Kelly shared that there are instances of feeling timid as a student due to the faculty member's astuteness and educational level. Power dynamics within the learning environment can be a hinderance to meaningful faculty-student interaction. Faculty who present themselves as relatable are likely to create a sense of approachability and foster comfort for students to engage. This finding is supported by Booker's (2016) research suggesting that faculty who were "relatable, engaging, and connected with them both inside and outside of the classroom" positively shaped students' educational experiences (p. 222). Further, a recent study discussed humanizing faculty practices such as showing care through centering the experiences of students and acknowledging student strengths and unique identities (García-Louis et al., 2023). The women in this study want faculty who acknowledge these commonalities, understand adult learners' complexities, and demonstrate care for complexities beyond the classroom.

Expectations of Faculty.

In addition to wanting caring, understanding, and relatable faculty, the Black female adult learners in this case study voiced expecting faculty to be reliable, communicative, and

supportive. They expect that faculty members will support their development in the classroom and see the value they can have for students' development outside the classroom. They want to be able to depend on faculty to share their expertise and wisdom. Camille noted that faculty should be more forthcoming regarding academic and career guidance, supporting the expectation of useful communication.

They also want detailed syllabi that clearly communicate course structure and what faculty expect from students. This expectation reiterates their desire for communicative faculty members (Brooks et al., 2023). Notably, Esmeralda expressed that, in her experience, faculty have not been as helpful as she assumed they would be. She described instances where she had to "figure it out" on her own. The data revealed that the women expect faculty to help them. Mo shared that she wants to feel secure that if she is struggling, faculty are "going to help us as much as they can." These Black female adult learners expect their community college faculty to be helpful, supportive, communicative, gain a better understanding of adult students, and show care and concern.

Connecting the "Who" and "How"

It is essential to note that the study's findings are interrelated. Finding one focuses on the "who" in faculty-student interaction and emphasizes the responsibility both faculty and students have in the process of interacting and engaging within the learning space. Finding two provides the "how" and addresses elements to foster meaningful faculty-student interactions from the perspective of Black female adult learners. Meaningful faculty-student interactions encompass care and validation. Taken together, the study's findings provide valuable insight to cultivate student-centered faculty practices. The findings also share the voices of students who see value in interacting with faculty *and* want to be valued in the process.

Theoretical Implications

Black Feminist Thought served as the theoretical framework guiding this study, emphasizing the voice, dialogue, knowledge validation, and safe spaces elements of the theory as most relevant to the examination of faculty-student interactions. The framework as presented by Collins (1989) centers the lived experiences of Black women and seeks to empower Black women. As discussed in chapter two, spaces where Black women can find their voice and dialogue with others, build relationships and foster connectedness, and are validated as creators and contributors of knowledge may be considered safe spaces and safe havens (Collins, 1989).

In addition, aspects of Rendón's (1994) validation theory conceptually influenced examining Black female adult learners' perceptions of meaningful interactions with faculty. Validation theory stresses the criticality of faculty considering the backgrounds of students (especially marginalized students), initiating interactions with students, and serving as a validating agent who provides valuable feedback, shows genuine care, and creates a learning space where students feel capable of learning (Baber, 2018; Kitchen, 2021; Rendón, 1994, 2002).

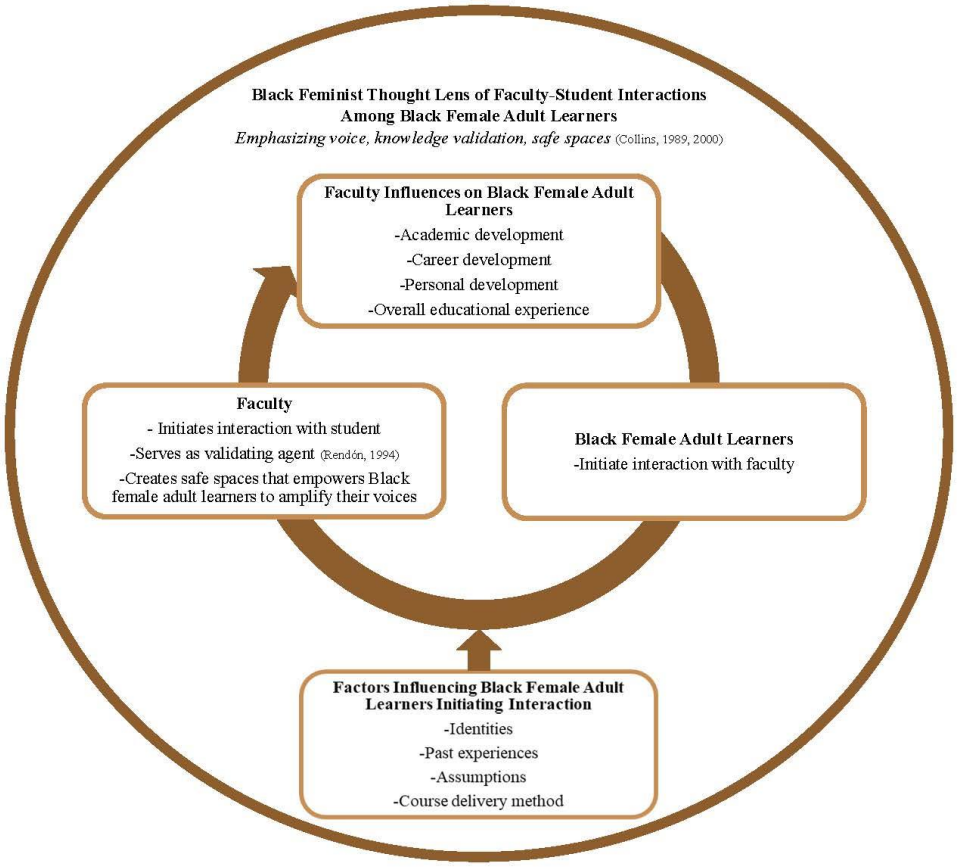
Taken together, this study extends Black Feminist Thought by integrating validation theory along with concepts of adult learning theory to provide an appropriate conceptual model to examine meaningful interactions among Black female adult learners and community college faculty. Data from the interviews and reflective journal support the concepts and elements of the theories.

The study's findings demonstrate that Black female adult learners want faculty to initiate meaningful interactions and want to be validated through faculty feedback and affirming statements. However, there are varying factors that influence the Black female adult learners' interactions with faculty which should be considered by faculty members. Additionally, the

women in the study discussed the role students play in faculty-student interactions, thereby placing responsibility on the student to also engage and interact with faculty. Figure 5.1 illustrates a revised conceptual model to examine faculty-student interactions among Black female adult learners that includes this study's findings.

Figure 5.1

Revised Conceptual Model That Integrates Study Findings



Faculty-student interactions can be viewed as a dialectical exchange in which both voices are valuable. Dialectical exchanges and voice are necessary in the validation process, with faculty serving as validating agents exhibiting such characteristics as relatability, understanding, and care. Faculty should initiate interaction with students, thus creating spaces where students

feel confident and comfortable to also initiate interactions with faculty members, thus creating a cyclical faculty-student interaction process. It is important to note that the onus is on faculty members to create a learning space that is perceived as approachable by students, lessening the intimidation of reaching out to faculty regarding academic and non-academic matters (Dingel & Punti, 2023; Rendón, 1994, 2002). Lastly, it is also essential that faculty consider that various factors, including race, gender, generational status, past educational experiences, and course delivery format, likely shape how Black female adult learners interact and engage (Bonner et al., 2015).

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

By centering the experiences of Black female adult learners enrolled in community college, this study offers insight into how this subgroup of students perceives meaningful faculty-student interactions. The findings determined that Black female adult learners desire more intentional, faculty-initiated interactions and they desire meaningful interactions that acknowledge, validate, and affirm who they are as unique, dynamic individuals. Additionally, the data revealed the positive influence Black faculty and other campus agents had on the women's educational experiences. The findings of this case study offer implications for community college policy and faculty practice that aim to increase faculty of color and develop validating faculty practices.

Faculty Diversification

This study revealed a lack of faculty representative of students of color, namely Black faculty. Other campus agents were described as visible on campus; however, research shows faculty of color can increase sense of belongingness, build connectedness, increase academic self-efficacy, and serve as role models for students of color. Community college faculty who

reflect the diversity of the student body have an opportunity to enhance the student experience (Cross & Carman, 2021; Hund, 2020; Levin et al., 2014).

It is essential for institutional strategic plans to include goals to increase faculty diversification and to specify initiatives to implement, implementation timeframes, and evaluative measures. Strategic planning is an opportunity for community college presidents and administration to facilitate institutional change and foster a campus culture shift that embodies educational equity (Eddy et al., 2021a; Fujii, 2014; Leal-Carrillo et al., 2023). A former community college president explained how the role of president should involve leading by example; facilitating difficult conversations on diversity, equity, and inclusion; creating an environment that supports personal and professional growth of all staff and faculty (especially those of color); building trust; and building a community of change agents through hiring and retention practices (Rodriguez, 2015).

Recruiting Faculty of Color

It is important for institutions committed to diversifying faculty to seek out qualified potential applicants and not solely rely on applicants contacting the community college about career opportunities. Recruiters, departmental chairs, or deans may find it advantageous to attend professional association conferences or job fairs geared towards people of color. Advertising available faculty positions on job boards or professional networks that are frequented by diverse groups may also yield the desired applicant pool (Hughes, 2015; Hund, 2020; Levin et al., 2014). Hiring committees must be strategic and intentional with regards to recruiting faculty of color.

Retaining Faculty of Color

Retention initiatives, such as learning communities and mentoring opportunities, can be utilized to address attrition issues with faculty of color. Learning communities can address

marginalization, reduce feelings of isolation, and build camaraderie among faculty members. They provide a collaborative teaching environment which equalizes power structures. Learning communities allow for networking and interdepartmental connections, which help acclimate faculty to campus culture. Team teaching within learning communities supports peer and colleague-level mentoring (Loveless-Morris & Reid, 2018). Additionally, community college retention best practices include faculty internship programs which employ newly graduated students, provide fewer instructional hours, and pair new faculty with a mentor to encourage collaboration and development of teaching skills (Hughes, 2015).

Mentoring is another retention tool that can be used to retain faculty of color. The role of the mentor can be career-oriented, provide professional advice and guidance, and offer emotional support. Mentor networks are adaptable based on mentees' needs. Retention, pursuit of career advancement opportunities, and higher job satisfaction are common benefits of mentoring relationships (Barrett, 2020). New or early career community college faculty will likely benefit from engaging closely with an experienced faculty mentor. Mentors can provide guidance with institutional policies and procedures, relationship building across academic disciplines, and navigation of pedagogical challenges (Reynolds et al., 2022).

Professional Development for Faculty

Findings from this study revealed that Black female adult learners want faculty who are relatable, understanding, and caring. Providing faculty members with resources to aid in developing or enhancing these skills would likely foster safe spaces for students to interact and engage with faculty. Professional development workshops can focus on training faculty members to act as validating agents who initiate interactions with students (Rendón, 1994). Developing

student-centered faculty members who exhibit care, understanding, and relate to their students can positively influence the overall educational experience for all students.

Generally, students want approachable and relatable faculty. Faculty are encouraged to be more visible on campus outside of academic spaces such as cafeterias, student unions, athletic events, and other campus events. Attendance at non-academic events allows students to make connections with faculty beyond coursework. Faculty can be trained in appropriate self-disclosure to demonstrate commonalities and build rapport with students.

How can faculty better understand their students? Most courses start the semester with ice breakers to help learners "get to know" each other. However, these activities may not allow faculty members to understand who their students are beyond being *students*. Professional development facilitators can work with faculty to develop more robust activities to help them better understand the many layers students bring into the classroom, including their fears or assumptions about the college experience. For example, faculty sharing what they were afraid of when they were students displays their humanness and may inspire students to share by creating a space that validates vulnerability.

Cultivating caring faculty coincides with faculty who are understanding. As previously mentioned, students enter the learning space with unique lived experiences which typically influence how they engage with faculty and peers. Adult learners are likely balancing multiple responsibilities and life roles. It is essential that faculty show genuine care and concern for the other aspects of who students are and see past their role as a student (Ortiz et al., 2021).

Training workshops can be led by faculty; this emphasizes faculty autonomy and empowers faculty members to take an active role in their professional development (Layou et al. 2022). Interactive workshop activities provide a space for faculty members to build skills and

practice engaging in practices that foster an ethic of care, understanding, and relatability. Upon completion of training, faculty members can develop action plans to implement with students that support frequent and validating practices. Professional development offered through varying modalities (e.g., in-person sessions, asynchronous and synchronous virtual sessions) may incentivize faculty to participate (Miller et al., 2022; Ortiz et al., 2021).

Community college leadership plays a crucial role in campus culture. Administrators who are committed to being student-centered and desire to use the faculty-student relationship as a tool to enhance the student experience must foster a campus culture that emphasizes the significance and benefits of meaningful faculty-student interactions. More effort is necessary to better equip faculty members to serve students entering college with varying backgrounds, cultures, academic preparedness, life responsibilities, and socioeconomic conditions (Eddy et al., 2021b). It is widely known that part-time faculty represent a significant portion of community college instructors. Generally, inadequate professional development and time for student engagement due to time constraints are concerns for part-time faculty (Layou et al., 2022). However, these challenges present possible adverse implications for faculty-student interactions. Community college leadership must begin to address this culture among part-time faculty and shift to a commitment to improving faculty interactions.

Recommendations for Future Research

This case study centered the experiences and amplified the voices of Black female adult learners. The findings provided valuable insight into their perceptions of meaningful interactions with their community college faculty to better understand their needs. Research has shown the significance of faculty-student interaction and its influence on student motivation, academic self-efficacy, and sense of belonging which lends itself to additional research exploring other aspects

of the faculty-student relationship. Future research focusing on the faculty perspective, other understudied student demographics, and online course engagement will further enhance our understanding of faculty-student interactions.

Faculty Perspective

Throughout this study, it has been articulated how faculty plays a significant role in the student experience. Additional information about the faculty perspective on interacting with students is necessary if we are to have a more robust understanding of the faculty-student relationship, how faculty see themselves in the relationship, and how faculty members experience engaging with students (Owusu-Agyeman, 2023; Vetter et al., 2019). Future research could explore how faculty define faculty-student interactions, what value faculty place (if any) on interacting with students, and how interacting and engaging with students influences their lives personally or professionally.

Much of the literature on faculty-student interactions has focused on the four-year college/university setting, creating a gap in our understanding of FSI at the community college. Future research on the community college faculty perspective would expand our knowledge of the faculty-student relationship. It is also critical to consider the perspective of part-time faculty as they generally represent a significant percentage of community college faculty.

Additionally, further research on faculty of color's perspective on the faculty-student relationship with students with whom they share identities would enhance our understanding of the unique dynamic between faculty of color and students of color. Research has shown that a diverse faculty can positively shape the educational experience of students of color (Hund, 2020). However, from the faculty of color's perspective, what are the benefits and risks of forging close faculty-student relationships with students of color? In what ways are Black faculty

(or staff) susceptible to workplace risks due to building relationships with Black students? How comfortable are Black faculty (or staff) with extending themselves to connect with Black students? How do institutional factors such as campus climate and culture influence Black campus agents' willingness to serve as mentors for Black students? It is necessary to examine the experiences and perspectives of faculty of color who choose to or choose not to engage with students with shared identities to address such questions (Levin et al., 2014; Oates, 2023).

Other Understudied Student Populations

Black female adult learners represent one of several understudied populations attending community colleges. In recent years, numerous North Carolina community colleges have received federal grants to increase post-secondary educational opportunities for students from rural communities. As colleges seek to enroll more rural students, examining their interaction with faculty could provide useful insight to better support this understudied student group and inform intervention initiatives (Bowlin & Culter White, 2024; Hlinka, 2017). Faculty interactions with students who are parents is another potential area of research; it would be helpful to examine meaningful FSI that consider the student's family dynamics and time constraints (Lindsay & Gillum, 2018). Future research on meaningful faculty-student interactions among other marginalized or minoritized student populations would be beneficial for the continued development of student-centered faculty practices (Callaway, 2023).

The study findings discussed students' hesitancy with interacting with faculty, and at times, the hesitation resulted in silence. Research on "The Often Overlooked Student" or "The Silent Student," who are reluctant to engage with faculty even during times of need, can increase our understanding of students' communicative struggles in the learning space. How might the

overlooked and silenced student be empowered to use his or her voice? Faculty seeking to reach distant or disengaged students may find this data useful (Brint & Cantwell, 2014).

Online Course Interaction and Engagement

The data revealed differences in engagement levels based on course delivery method. A few of the Black female adult learners in this study described less genuine interactions in their online courses; however, they desire more meaningful interactions in these virtual spaces comparable to the interactions in their face-to-face courses (Bartek et al., 2020). While a deep examination of online course faculty-student interactions is outside the scope of this study, future research on meaningful engagement in distance education could provide insight into approaches to affirm and motivate students in online learning (James et al., 2022). For convenience, many adult learners enroll in online courses; research on faculty-student interactions in distance education could also add to adult learner literature and discourse (Shea & Bidjerano, 2019).

Recommendations for Black Female Adult Learners

Seminal research on mattering reveals motivation can be influenced when students feel they matter to someone (Schlossberg, 1989). Research has also shown a significant relationship between feelings of mattering and academic achievement (Swanson & Cole, 2022). Mattering questions include: do I matter to someone? Does someone care about what I do? Does someone care about what I think? Does someone care about what happens to me? Mattering represents a reciprocal feeling of significance (Schlossberg, 1989).

The Black female adult learners in this study are well aware of the significant role their faculty members play in their educational experiences. However, what is the answer to the question in reverse? Do the women in this study matter to others on their college campus? Is mattering even important to Black female adult learners? My answer would be yes, it is

important to them. Some of the women shared how seeing other Black women on their campus inspired them, motivated them, and made them feel seen.

Christina Porter's (2022) study on reimagining belonging for Black college women emphasizes going beyond a sense of belonging. Feelings of mattering point to not simply fitting into the campus culture but to feeling cared for, feeling valued. Mattering encompasses feeling important to someone, someone taking an interest in a student, viewing the student's success as a personal success and their failure as a personal failure. Mattering acknowledges contributions, strengths, and growth (Johnson, 2012; Porter, 2022; Schlossberg, 1989; Swanson & Cole, 2022).

When college campuses do not create opportunities to foster feelings of mattering, Black women must create their own spaces (Porter, 2022). The Black female adult learners in this study want to be their authentic selves. They want to be heard, seen, acknowledged, validated, encouraged, respected, vulnerable. They want to matter! I want Black female adult learners to create their own safe spaces; spaces where they not only survive but thrive; spaces where they feel empowered. I want Black female adult learners to connect with faculty members, advisors, financial aid specialists, front desk greeters, bookstore clerks, business office cashiers, lab partners, and students reading in the student union. I want Black female adult learners to create spaces on their college campus with those who make them feel safe, seen, heard, and who remind them that they matter!

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with a discussion of the study's two key findings through the lens of Black Feminist Thought and validation theory. Next, theoretical implications and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research were discussed. The chapter concluded

with recommendations for Black female adult learners to find spaces on their college campuses where they can engage and ultimately be empowered.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Assistance with Recruitment Email

Good morning/afternoon,

As I am a doctoral candidate at North Carolina State University in the Adult and Lifelong Education program, I am conducting a study to examine the educational experiences of Black female adult students at the community college and their interactions with faculty members.

This institution would be an ideal research site due to [redacted]. Because of your role as the [redacted], I am seeking your assistance in recruiting adult learners to participate in the study. I ask that you email the attached recruitment flyer to currently enrolled adult students.

I would also like to ask for approval to display the study recruitment flyer on campus in high student traffic areas such as library, classroom buildings, students services/support department areas, student union, and similar areas. For your convenience and with institutional permission, I can make myself available to come to campus on a designated day/time to post the flyer in approved campus locations.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

Thank you for your time and assistance.

Warm regards,

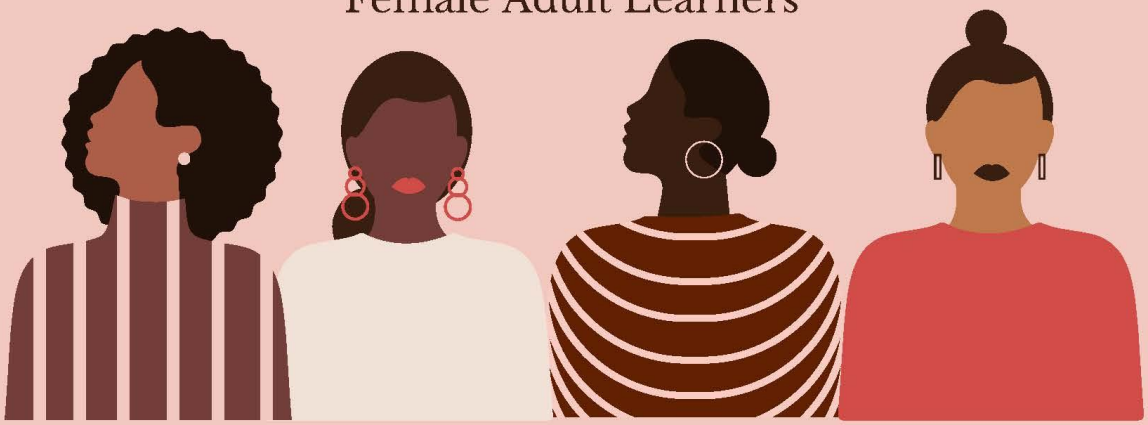
Eboni N. Malloy
enmalloy@ncsu.edu
980-253-0811 cell phone

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Invitation To Participate In Research Study

Engage, Empower, Educate:

Exploring Meaningful Faculty Interactions with Black Female Adult Learners



Qualifications To Participate

- ✓ Black Woman
- ✓ Aged 25 years or older
- ✓ Financially independent
- ✓ Enrolled in an associate, diploma, or certificate program
- ✓ Completed at least 12 credit hours

Participants Will Be Asked To

1. Complete Two Virtual Interviews (60 mins.)
2. Complete Reflective Journal (Two audio, video, or written entries)

Interested in participating?

Please contact:

Eboni N. Malloy, Doctoral Candidate
enmalloy@ncsu.edu

Dept of Educational Leadership, Policy, & Human Development
Dr. Susan Barcinas, Advisor

Participants will receive a $50 gift card upon completion of the study!

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

IRB #26421

Appendix C: Response to Interested Student Email

Good morning/afternoon,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study!

I am currently a doctoral student at North Carolina State University researching Black female adult learners and their interactions with community college faculty. I am eager to learn more about you and your experiences.

The study will include:
1) Initial virtual interview (approximately 60 minutes)
2) Two reflective journal entries (approximately 10-30 minutes)
3) Follow-up virtual interview (approximately 60 minutes)

Upon completion of interviews, you will also be asked to review your interview summary (optional). The total time commitment would be approximately 3 hours. When you complete both interviews and the reflective journal, you will be given a **$50 eGift card** to thank you for your participation!

Participation in the study is completely voluntary and confidential. An informed consent form must be electronically signed by verbal consent in order to participate in the study. I have attached the form to this email for your review. You will also be asked to select a pseudonym to protect your identity.

Please provide your contact number so that I may reach out to you to discuss any questions you may have and schedule your initial interview.

Thank you for your time and I look forward to speaking with you.

Warm regards,
Eboni N. Malloy
enmalloy@ncsu.edu
980-253-0811 cell phone

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: Engage, Empower, Educate: A Case Study on Black Female Adult Learners and Their Perception of Meaningful Faculty Interaction (**eIRB** #26421)

Investigator/Researcher: Eboni N. Malloy, enmalloy@ncsu.edu, 980-253-0811

NC State Faculty Point of Contact: Dr. Susan Barcinas, Dissertation Committee Chair

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are invited to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher named above or the NC State IRB office. The IRB office's contact information is listed in the What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant? section of this form.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to examine, from the perspective of Black female adult learners, their meaningful student interactions with community college faculty.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Complete one initial zoom-based virtual interview for approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be audio and video recorded.
2. Complete one follow-up zoom-based virtual interview for approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be audio and video recorded.
3. Complete two reflective journal entries for approximately 10-30 minutes.
4. Both interviews will be conducted via Zoom and will be video/audio recorded and transcribed. Recordings and transcriptions will be stored on a password protected computer and password protected file.
5. Reflective journal entries will be stored in password protected Google drive folder only accessible by the investigator/researcher and participant.

6. Review and verify your interview summary via password protected Google drive folder for approximately 15-30 minutes (OPTIONAL).

The total amount of time that you will participate in the study is approximately 3 hours.

During your interviews and journal entries, when you share stories, you will be asked not to share the names or titles of other people.

Recording and images

If you want to participate in this research, you must agree to be audio-recorded and video recorded. If you do not agree to be audio-recorded or video recorded, you cannot participate in this research.

Risks and benefits

There are no anticipated risks associated with participation in this research.

There are no direct benefits to your participation in the research. The indirect benefits are self-reflection on meaningful faculty-student interactions which may help improve the educational experiences for future adult students.

Right to withdraw your participation

You can stop participating in this study at any time for any reason. To do so, just stop any research activity that you are doing or contact the student researcher, Eboni N. Malloy, at enmalloy@ncsu.edu and 980-253-0811. You can also contact the faculty advisor for this research, Susan Barcinas, at Susan_Barcinas@ncsu.edu and 919-515-6298. If you choose to withdraw your consent and to stop participating in this research, you can expect that the researcher(s) will redact your data from their data set, securely destroy your data, and prevent future uses of your data for research purposes wherever possible. This is possible in some, but not all, cases.

Confidentiality, personal privacy, and data management

Trust is the foundation of the participant/researcher relationship. Much of that principle of trust is tied to keeping your information private and in the manner that I have described to you in this form. The information that you share with me will be held in confidence to the fullest extent allowed by law.

Protecting your privacy as related to this research is of utmost importance to me. There are very rare circumstances related to confidentiality where I may have to share information about you. Your information collected in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies (for example, the FDA) for purposes such as quality control or safety. In other cases, I must report instances in which imminent harm could come to you or others.

How I manage, protect, and share your data are the principal ways that I protect your personal privacy. Data that will be shared with others about you will be de-identified.

De-identified. De-identified data is information that at one time can directly identify you, but I will record this data so that your identity will be separated from the data. I will have a master list with your code and real name that I can use to link to your data.

Future use of your research data

Your information even with identifiers removed, will not be stored or distributed for future research studies.

Compensation

You will receive a $50 Visa eGift card once you complete the study (two interviews and two reflective journal entries). There will be no compensation for participants who withdraw from the study prior to its completion.

What if you have questions about the study?

If you have any questions about the research or how it is implemented, please contact the investigator/researcher, Eboni N. Malloy at enmalloy@ncsu.edu and 980-253-0811.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or are concerned with your treatment throughout the research process, please contact the NC State University IRB Director at IRB-Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or fill out a confidential form online at https://research.ncsu.edu/administration/compliance/research-compliance/irb/irb-forms-and-templates/participant-concern-and-complaint-form/

Consent to Participate By verbally agreeing to sign this consent form (via Zoom), I am affirming that I have read and understand the above information. All of the questions that I had about this research have been answered. I have chosen to participate in this study with the understanding that I may stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I am aware that I may revoke my consent at any time.

☐ **Yes, I consent to participating in this research study**

Name_____

Email_____

Today's Date _____

☐ **No, I do not consent to participating in this research study.**

Appendix E: Initial Interview Protocol

Engage, Empower, Educate: A Case Study of Black Female Adult Learners and Their Perspective on Meaningful Faculty Interactions

Pseudonym: **Time of Interview:**
Date: **Place:**

Opening the interview:
Thank you so much for meeting with me today. Before we get started, I previously sent you the consent form. Thank you for completing the form. Just as a reminder, participating in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your identity will be anonymous and everything will be confidential. Do you have any questions?

Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Great, thank you.

Begin recording.

Again, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed. The study hopes to learn more about the experiences of Black female adult learners who attend community colleges and how they interact with their faculty members. During the interviews we are going to discuss your experiences and perceptions of meaningful faculty-student interactions.

Just a reminder that today's interview should last about 1 hour. At the end of the interview, I will give you instructions to complete the reflective journal and schedule our follow-up interview.

When we scheduled your interview appointment, I asked if you would share a photo of where you usually study. To start today's interview, I will ask you to share that photo and explain your go-to study area and why this is your place?

During this process, please feel free to ask me to repeat or clarify a question. Also, if there is something that I have not asked and you would like to share your thoughts or tell me more about your experience, please feel free to do that at any time.

Questions:

1. Tell me about your experiences prior to attending your current college?
    a. What led you here?
2. Tell me about your teachers in the past. (K-12 or previous colleges)
    a. How have those teachers influenced you?
    b. What did you like or not like about your teachers?
3. Talk me through your experiences here since attending your current community college? What has it been like?

4. Thinking about your interactions with your faculty, how do you see the importance of your relationship with or interactions with faculty members?
5. How would you describe your interactions inside of the classroom?
6. How would you describe your interactions with faculty outside of class time?
    a. In what ways do you interact with your faculty outside of class (for example, office hours, virtually, email, etc.?) Please describe; can you give me an example, etc.
7. Now that you have thought about your faculty interactions, describe any interactions with faculty that you feel have been meaningful to your educational experience?
8. In what ways have these meaningful interactions or lack of contributed to your educational experience?
    a. Factors such as: motivation, sense of belongingness, academic growth, personal growth, academic self-confidence, campus involvement, persistence, etc.
9. Tell me about any other interactions or relationships that have shaped your academic or personal development.
10. Based on your personal experiences, do you feel like your identity as a Black woman influenced your overall educational journey?
    a. Can you tell me about a specific situation when you felt that being a Black woman was relevant or made a difference?
    b. How has that made a difference in how you see yourself?

Closing the interview:
These are all my formal questions. Do you have any questions for me or anything you would like to share that I did not cover?

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me today! Now, I will review the information and instructions for the reflective journal.

We will also schedule your follow-up interview.

Thank you again and please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the research process or regarding your journal.

End recording.

Appendix F: Reflective Journal Protocol

Engage, Empower, Educate: A Case Study of Black Female Adult Learners and Their Perspective on Meaningful Faculty Interactions

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I am eager to learn more about you and your story. I would like this reflective journal to be an opportunity for you to think about and reflect on your experiences and share your story about being a Black female adult learner.

Journal entries:

- Please complete at least two (2) journal entries.
- For your convenience, you may use any format that is comfortable for you -- a written, audio, or video journal.
- No length requirement -- you are encouraged to share at your comfort level.
- Prompts are provided below to help you think about what to include in your journal, however you are not required to use the listed prompts.

PLEASE NOTE: the reflective journal is a private journal, do not include other individuals.

Journal submission:

- I will email you a private Google folder link that is only accessible by you and myself.
- You will upload your journal entry to the private Google folder.
- You are asked to complete journal entries and submit:
    - Journal entry #1 by (TBD date)
    - Journal entry #2 by (TBD date).

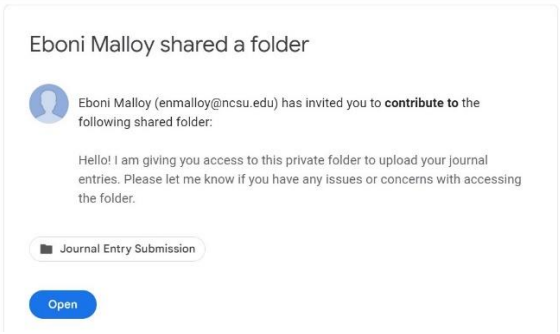
If you choose to complete an audio or video entry, you can use your cell phone or another recording device to record. Please be sure you are able to upload the recorded entry to the Google folder. If you have any concerns or issues with recordings, please feel free to contact me.

Journal entry prompts:

1. When you think about being a Black woman, what does that mean to you and what kinds of experiences have you had? What has influenced your sense of yourself as a black woman?
2. Considering your role and identity as an adult student, what comes to mind? What does that mean to you? Can you describe what it is like?
3. If you could go back to your first semester, what would you do differently? Why?
4. How do you think other people see you as a Black female adult student? How do you think your faculty views you? How do you think your peers in your classes view you?

Google Drive Submission Instructions

1. You will receive the email that Eboni Malloy (enmalloy@ncsu.edu) is sharing the Google Folder with you.
2. Click the blue OPEN button.



3. Google may send you a verification code to your email address.
    a. Please check your email and spam folder for this code.
    b. Enter code and click NEXT
4. You should now be able to access and view the Journal Submission Folder.
5. Files (Word document file, audio file, or video file) can be uploaded to the folder by clicking on the + NEW button located at the top left of the folder.
6. Next click FILE UPLOAD
7. You will then select the saved file.

You can also upload files to the Google Drive folder via your cell phone if you have the Google Drive app downloaded on your cell phone.

Audio and video files may be easier to upload from cell phones directly to the Journal Submission folder.

Video Entry on Cell Phone:

1. Click on CAMERA icon
2. Select video and start recording
3. After finishing the recording, exit the camera app.
4. Click on the GOOGLE DRIVE icon on cell phone
5. Select the Journal Submission Folder
6. Click + at the bottom right of the screen
7. Select UPLOAD, than select PHOTOS/VIDEOS
8. Select the video you want to upload and click UPLOAD

Audio Entry on Cell Phone:

1. Click on VOICE MEMO icon or other audio recording icon
2. Press RECORD button
3. After finishing the recording, select SHARE
4. Click on GOOGLE DRIVE
5. Select JOURNAL SUBMISSION FOLDER, click SAVE HERE

NOTE: Cell phones may differ on exact icons and wording. Save the word document or recordings as Entry #1 and Entry #2. Please contact me if you have any questions or issues with uploading.

Appendix G: Follow-up Interview Protocol

Engage, Empower, Educate: A Case Study of Black Female Adult Learners and Their Perspective on Meaningful Faculty Interactions

Pseudonym: **Time of Interview:**
Date: **Place:**

Opening the interview:
Thank you again for agreeing to be interviewed and sharing your experiences with your faculty.

Do you have any questions about your informed consent? Same as our first interview, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Great, thank you.

Begin recording.

How have you been since our last meeting? (check-in)

Tell me about your journal entry? How did that go?

Walk me through each entry.

Journal entry probing questions:

1. Researcher topic checklist for follow-up questions (if needed)
    a. Validated/not validated
    b. Supported/not supported
    c. Respected/not respected; valued/not valued
    d. Motivated/not motivated
    e. Feeling like you belong/do not feel like you belong
    f. Feeling like you are a capable thinker/do not feel like you are capable
    g. Share ideas/thoughts or speak up; do not share or speak up
    h. Welcoming learning space, campus climate/not welcoming
    i. Past experiences are valued/not valued

    Probes: Tell me more about that. Can you give me an example? Can you explain what you mean by that?

Thank you so much for reflecting and sharing your entries. I hope it gave you an opportunity to think about what being a Black woman who is also an adult student means to you and your experiences.

Questions:

2. How does being an adult student influence how you interact and engage with faculty?
3. Tell me how does being a female influence the way you interact and engage with faculty.
4. How does being Black influence how you interact and engage with faculty?
5. Thinking about all of those together, how does being Black, a female and an adult student influence the way you interact and engage with faculty?
6. Describe your comfort level with interacting and engaging with faculty as a Black female adult learner.
    a. Can you tell me more about why you feel that way?
    b. How can faculty be more approachable and make you feel more comfortable?
7. When interacting with faculty, how do you feel your cultural background is valued? In what ways isn't it not valued?
8. How do you feel your voice, thoughts, or opinions are valued and respected? Or not valued or respected?
9. When interacting with faculty, in what ways do you feel your previous experiences (life experiences, professional experiences, or former college experiences) are welcomed in the learning process? In what ways is it not welcomed?
10. Can you talk me through how faculty has shown care and support?
11. Tell me about the ways that your faculty initiate or encourage interactions with students?
    a. Do you have any opinions about who should initiate interactions, the faculty member or student? Why?
12. What are your expectations of faculty?
    a. Where do you think your expectations came from?
13. Can you describe the race/ethnic groups of the faculty members you have had or currently have?
    a. Would you interact differently with faculty if they were of a different race? If so, why?
    b. Would you interact differently with faculty if they were of a different gender? If so, why?
14. How have previous experiences (life experiences, professional experiences, or former college experiences) contributed to the way you interact with faculty?
15. What more can faculty do to enhance your educational experience as a Black woman and as an adult student?
16. As we close out, would you like to share anything I did not cover?

Closing the interview:

These are all my formal questions. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me! Soon I will begin transcribing the interview and the analysis process. Would you like to review your interview transcript to ensure we have an accurate account of our conversation?

(If yes) Great, thank you! I will contact you within a few weeks and provide the interview transcript for your review. Thank you again and have a wonderful day!

End recording.