COLLEGE-TO-CAREER EXPERIENCE:
BLACK AND HISPANIC FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE GRADUATES

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DEDICATION

In honor of my mother, Mattie, and my father, Haynes, who believed in and empowered me to believe in myself.

To my daughter, Joelle, who inspires me every day: Believe in yourself.

To all Black or Hispanic first-generation college students and graduates, like myself: I believe in you.

To every first-generation college student or graduate seeking to advance their careers or achieve their dreams: Always believe.
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Above all, I thank God, the Almighty, for always blessing me and “making a way out of no way,” as my African American ancestral prayer warriors would say. I am eternally grateful for all the gifts known and unknown with which God has abundantly enriched me.

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In closing, I simply and sincerely say, thank you!
ABSTRACT

COLLEGE-TO-CAREER EXPERIENCE:
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This study examined the lived college-to-career experiences of 23 Black and Hispanic first-generation bachelor’s degree recipients who completed an 18-month career preparation program conducted by Management Leadership for Tomorrow, a non-profit organization dedicated to the career preparation and professional advancement of high-performing emerging leaders from underrepresented, diverse communities, including undergraduate students transitioning from college to career.

With record high costs of higher education, increased demand for bachelor’s degree credentials in the labor force, and disproportionately higher rates of unemployment for Black and Hispanic first-generation college graduates, understanding the forces that influence the college-to-career transition of Black and Hispanic first-generation bachelor’s degree recipients is critical. Using a qualitative research approach, the data gathered from semi-structured interviews were analyzed through the prisms of human capital theory and social cognitive career theory, a career-related construct for examining the personal, behavioral, and environmental forces influencing individual career choices, expectations, decisions, and outcomes.

The findings point to five forces influencing the college-to-career experiences of the 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduates in this study: family, persistence, preparation, networking, and race.
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“No matter where you come from or how much money your family has...you can succeed in college, and get your degree, and then go on to build an incredible life for yourself”, asserted Michelle Obama, the 44th First-Lady of the United States of America who is a Black first-generation college graduate (Tchen, 2014, “Transcript,” para. 4).

Chapter 1: Introduction

Imagine a nation that fully utilizes the talent of all its college graduates, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, social class, or parental educational level, a world where, as Michelle Obama, the 44th First-Lady of the United States of America and a Black first-generation college graduate, proclaimed: “no matter where you come from or how much money your family has...you can succeed” (Tchen, 2014). As a young Black girl from a large, low-income, two-parent, family, raised in the urban neighborhoods of Washington, DC at a time when the tension of the civil rights movement loomed large, I believed that an undergraduate college degree would be my “ticket” to socioeconomic upward mobility. My parents, who never attained bachelor’s degrees, and who only had high school diplomas when I enrolled in college, intuitively understood the value of a college degree, and encouraged degree attainment for me and my many siblings.

My journey from college to career, as a Black first-generation college (FGC) student whose parents never completed an undergraduate degree, was filled with the feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and lack of a sense of belonging that are characteristic of FGC students (Engle, Bermeo & O’Brien, 2006; Jehangir, 2010; Pascarella, Pierson & Wolniak, 2004). I vividly recall many encounters at college and work that made me feel like I was in a foreign land with languages, behaviors, and expectations so unfamiliar that they simply paralyzed me. In retrospect, there were times when I found my journeys to Africa, South and Central America, Asia, the Caribbean, and Puerto Rico, where I lived,
studied, worked, or travelled, to be easier to navigate than pioneering the frontiers of college and career in search of “a better life.”

These challenges notwithstanding, I persevered and achieved significant career success, ascending to senior and executive human resource leadership positions at multiple Fortune 500 companies, including senior vice president of human resource and vice president of recruiting. I also advanced to decanal leadership roles at several higher education institutions including dean of graduate and business studies and assistant dean of career management. As a human resources executive at the then-largest Hispanic American owned bank located in the United States as well as a decanal senior leader at a minority-serving university where I, in both leadership roles, facilitated the professional and career advancement of college students and graduates, I anecdotally observed a disproportionately low number of Black and Hispanic college graduates achieving the same level of career success as their White college graduate peers. Additionally, I witnessed many Black and Hispanic college graduates, who were most likely the first in their families to graduate with a bachelor’s degree, battle the same feelings of isolation and bewilderment that at times threatened to derail my career journey. I began to wonder, “What are the forces that influence the college-to-career transition of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates?”

This study explores the college-to-career transition of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates. I believe that many personal and professional forces contributed to my career success. As reported by other FGC students and graduates (Davis, 2010; Jehangir, 2010), I also derived support from my family, faith, and friends. On the other hand, while the literature indicates that FGC students and graduates lack access to the professional and
social networks that can promote career success (Olson, 2014; Parks-Yancy, 2012; Tate, Caperton, Kaiser, Pruitt, White, & Hall, 2015), I, albeit at a much later stage in my career, developed a robust professional and social network that enabled me to access career-enhancing information, resources, and people which I believe facilitated my career success.

Acknowledging the personal experiences and perspectives that I bring to this research topic, this study is intended to generate a more complete understanding of the college-to-career transitions for Black and Hispanic FGC graduates. More importantly, the findings should contribute knowledge to help ensure that the unalienable rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” as proclaimed by the Founding Fathers of the United States more than 200 years ago, are available to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, income, or parental educational attainment. Because employment is essential to achieving the unalienable rights conferred on all U.S. citizens, it is imperative that we understand the forces that influence the college-to-career transition of Black and Hispanic FGC students, thereby unleashing the economic means for this group to realize the American Dream.

To accentuate the college-to-career experiences of the selected Black and Hispanic FGC graduates in this study and to demonstrate that where you start does not have to determine where you go in life, excerpts of the career and life stories of six prominent Black and Hispanic FGC graduate luminaries are introduced throughout this manuscript. The featured accomplished leaders are:

(1) Michelle Obama, the forty-fourth First Lady of the United States of America, was the first and only Black First Lady, and the wife of the first Black President of the

(2) Franklin Chang-Diaz, the first Hispanic American astronaut and a member of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Hall of Fame, is the CEO of Adastra Rocket Company, a technology research and development corporation. Dr. Chang-Diaz, a first-generation college graduate and first-generation immigrant, was raised in Costa Rica and Venezuela until his teenage years when he attended high school in the United States. Chang-Diaz holds a doctoral degree in science with a specialty in applied plasma physics (American Physics Society, n.d.; Adastra Rocket Company, n.d.).

(3) Sonia Sotomayor, Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, is the first and only Hispanic and third female justice of the highest court in the United States. Sotomayor, a first-generation college graduate of Puerto Rican heritage, was raised in a low-income household by a single mother after the passing of her father. Before ascending to the highest court in the United States, Justice Sotomayor attained bachelor’s and law degrees and later litigated in private and public practice, including as judge and assistant district attorney (Supreme Court of the United States, n.d.; Wang, 2018).

(4) Oprah Winfrey, CEO of OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network), a global media company, entrepreneur, and philanthropist, is the first and only Black U.S. multibillionaire on the “2017 Forbes List of the World’s Billionaires” and the richest Black American in the world (Nsehe, 2017). Winfrey, a U.S. Presidential Medal of
Freedom recipient, grew up poor in the southern region of the United States and attained a bachelor’s degree before launching her global business (Matthiessen, 2017; Oprah Winfrey Facebook, n.d.).

(5) Kenneth C. Frazier, another first-generation college graduate, is the first Black American to lead a major pharmaceutical company and is one of “only three Black CEOs” leading a Fortune 500 company (Donnelly, 2018, p.1). Frazier, chairman of the board and chief executive officer of Merck & Co., Inc., attained bachelor’s and law degrees and worked as an attorney before assuming the top executive leadership role of a major U.S.-based global company (Frazier, 2017; Frazier, n.d; Phrma, n.d).

(6) Ursula Burns, the sixth luminary featured in this dissertation, is the first Black Hispanic woman CEO of a Fortune 500 company, Xerox, where she held the positions of chairman of the board and CEO. She was ranked 22nd of the “25 Most Powerful Woman in the World, 2014” (Howard, 2014). Burns, a first-generation college graduate and first-generation immigrant, was raised by a single mother who immigrated to the United States from Panama. Burns persisted through poverty to attain bachelor’s and master’s degree in mechanical engineering (Nole, n.d).

The sage, inspirational voices of the six Black and Hispanic FGC graduate luminaries featured throughout this document complement the powerful, insightful stories about the college-to-career experiences as told by the 23 selected FGC graduate participants in this study. The two viewpoints should deepen our understanding of the college-to-career experiences of Black and Hispanic first-generation college students and graduates who persevere to attain bachelor’s degrees and build incredible lives.
Statement of Problem

Black and Hispanic college graduates, individuals who are disproportionately FGC graduates, face greater difficulty transitioning from college to career than their White college graduate peers (Gaddis, 2015; Gould & Kroger, 2017). Today, the single greatest reason students invest in higher education is to advance their careers and increase earning potential (Choy, 2002; Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). Choy (2002) asserted: “Students enroll in college for many reasons, but most expect that earning a degree will improve their employability and their salary, both immediately and in the longer term” (p. 29). In the *College Payoff*, Carnevale et al. (2011) reported that an undergraduate degree is expected to generate 84% more earnings over a lifetime than a high school diploma—the equivalent of a $2.8 million earning premium.

In 2016, workers with at least a bachelor’s degree earned the majority (57%) of all wages (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). The demand for bachelor’s degrees is robust, with projected lifetime earnings for undergraduate degree holders eclipsing wages for those who only complete some postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., 2011). Moreover, Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2013) projected that by 2020 two thirds of job openings will require at least a bachelor’s degree, up from 16% in 1973. Increasingly, the path to higher earning careers is through higher education.

The face of the U.S. workforce is changing. The workplace is projected to become “more racially and ethnically diverse than in the past,” reported Cohn & Caumont (2016, p.1) in a Pew Research Center article. Data from the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau projected that, by 2055, there will be a significant demographic shift in America, resulting in no majority race or ethnic group. Frey (2015) reports: “The United States is in the midst of a
pivotal ushering in extraordinary shifts in the nation’s racial demographic makeup” (p. 3). Proactively preparing an expanding minority community to position themselves to participate—and even thrive—in an emerging, more diverse U.S. workforce should be beneficial to students, graduates, educators, employers, and society.

According to a 2015 U.S. Census Bureau report, *Projects of the Size and Composition of the U.S. Population: 2014 to 2060*, “the racial and ethnic composition of the population” (Colby & Ortman, 2015, p.1) is projected to represent 56.5% of the total U.S. population by 2060, up 18.6 percentage points from 2014. Hispanics, the largest minority group, are projected to account for 29% of the population, Blacks for 14%, and Asians for 9%. Individuals of more than one race (6%) are projected to be the fastest growing minority group. Whites are projected to account for 44% of the U.S. population by 2060 and are expected to remain the largest single ethnic/racial group (Colby & Ortman, 2015). However, by 2060, predicts Colby and Ortman (2015), Whites will no longer comprise a majority of the U.S. population.

Black and Hispanic FGC students represent a growing share of enrollments on U.S. college campuses across this nation (Davis, 2010; NCES, 2016). Yet, at the same time, unemployment rates for Black and Hispanic college graduates remain disproportionately high while the unemployment rate for White college graduates consistently stays comparatively low (Gould & Kroeger, 2017). Similarly, recent FGC graduates, who are disproportionately Black and Hispanic (Choy, 2002; NCES, 2015) and are defined as those whose parents had not attained a bachelor’s degree, find it more difficult to transition from college to career than their non-FGC graduate peers (Aronson, Callahan, & Davis, 2015; Eismann, 2016; Gushue & Mejia-Smith, 2017; Storlie,
Mostade, & Duenyas, 2015). Given the current and projected economic value of a bachelor’s degree, the need to understand the forces that influence the college-to-career transition for Black and Hispanic FGC graduates could not be greater.

Statement of Purpose and Significance

This study examines the college-to-career experiences of 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduates who attained professional employment after attaining their bachelor’s degrees. Employing a qualitative research approach, this study explored two questions:

1. What are the college-to-career experiences of selected Black and Hispanic FGC bachelor’s degree recipients?

2. What forces influenced the college-to-career experiences of selected Black and Hispanic FGC bachelor’s degree recipients?

I purposively selected Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants from among those who completed an 18-month career preparation program with Management Leadership for Tomorrow (MLT), described on its website (MLT, n.d.) as a nonprofit organization dedicated to the career preparation and development of high-achieving (average GPA of 3.5) women and men from underrepresented communities (Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans). All participants were U.S. citizens or residents between the ages of 22 and 33, attained bachelor’s degrees from a four-year U.S. public or nonprofit, private higher education institution between 2008 and 2016, and had lived and worked full-time within the Mid-Atlantic area comprised of the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and West Virginia, or adjacent metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs).
As higher education focuses on improving access, retention, and graduation rates for FGC students (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996) and diversifying the student population to include greater representation of historically underrepresented minoritized groups (Colby & Ortman, 2015; Davis, 2010; Frey, 2015), it is equally important that these same institutions pay attention to the college-to-career transition of FGC students, particularly Blacks and Hispanics, who struggle to secure employment upon graduation at an equal or higher rate as their non-first-generation and White college graduate peers (Aronson et al., 2015; Cooke, Gould & Kroeger, 2016; Eismann, 2016; Gould & Kroger, 2017; Maietta, 2016). This study seeks to improve understanding of the college-to-career transition of Black and Hispanic FGC students and build on findings from the research studies of Aronson et al. (2015), Eismann (2016), Olson (2010, 2014, 2016), Overton-Healy (2010), Parks-Yancy, (2012), Raque-Bogdan, & Lucas (2016), Storlie et al. (2015) and Tate et al. (2015).
“I didn't have any advantages, other than a wonderful set of parents and a wonderful infrastructure of people who helped. I didn't come into the world as a rich person. I didn't have special connections. I wasn't even born in the right country. So, if I can do it, anybody can” asserted Franklin Chang-Diaz, the first Hispanic United States Astronaut who is also a first-generation college graduate and first-generation immigrant (NOVA Science Now, 2009, “Being a role model”, para. 3).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This review of literature will elucidate the college-to-career experiences of the 23 Black and Hispanic first-generation college graduate participants in this study who persevered beyond challenging circumstances to achieve positive higher education and career transition outcomes even though the participants in this study, like Dr. Chang-Diaz, believed that they “didn’t have any advantages [and]…didn’t come in the world as a rich person” (NOVA Science Now, 2009).

Literature on the higher education experience of first-generation college (FGC) students and graduates (Bui, 2002; Chen & Caroll, 2005; Choy, 2002; Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2010; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012) and the college-to-career transition of students (Cooke, Gould & Kroeger, 2016; Gould & Kroeger, 2017; Hettich, 2010; Lent, Brown, Talleyrand, McPartland, Davis, Chopra,…Chai, 2002; Lent & Brown, 2006, 2017; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2000; Lewis, 2016; Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt; 2010; Savickas, 2012; Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi & Glasscock, 2001; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001; Thompson & Dahling, 2012) is robust. But, literature on college-to-career transition of FGC students and graduates is scarce (Aronson et al., 2015; Eismann, 2016; Maietta, 2016; Olson, 2010, 2014, 2016; Overton-Healy, 2010; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016; Storlie et al., 2015) and even more rare is attention to the
college-to-career transition of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates (Owens, Lacey, Rawls, & Holbert-Quince, 2010; Parks-Yancy, 2006, 2012; Tate et al., 2015).

The first part of this chapter delves into empirical research in two relevant areas: FGC students and graduates, and employment outcomes for Black and Hispanic college graduates. The second part of the chapter reviews the two theories that guide understanding of the college-to-career transition process: human capital theory and social cognitive career theory (SCCT). This review of prior empirical data provides the foundation for exploring the college-to-career transition of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates in this study.

To identify relevant research studies, I searched Google Scholar, ERIC, Franklin, and ProQuest databases. The key words and phrases searched included the following: first-generation college students, first-generation college graduates, college-to-career transition, career services, career preparation and development for college students, social capital and careers, human capital theory, social cognitive career theory, employment of college graduates, employment of first-generation college graduates, Black college graduates, and Hispanic college graduates. The search criteria focused primarily on works published after 2000. I also included groundbreaking research by Nuñez et al. (1998), Levine & Nidiffer (1996), Terenzini et al. (1996), Heckman (1998) and seminal works about theoretical frameworks by Becker (1957, 1975, 1992, 1994), Lent et al. (2000) and O’Neill (1990) as well as the literary work by Ellison (1952). The bibliographies of selected studies were used to uncover additional sources of research. Several hundred research findings were reviewed before deciding on the relevant empirical research and theoretical frameworks to inform this study.
First-Generation College Students

In this study, I define FGC students and graduates as those whose parents did not complete a bachelor’s degree before the students attained their undergraduate degrees, adopting the definition used by the Federal TRIO Program (U.S. Department of Education, TRIO Program, 2011) and the Pell Institute (PNPI, 2016). However, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), whose data are also reported in this dissertation, defines FGC students as those “who are enrolled in postsecondary education and who have at least one parent who had some postsecondary education experience” (Redford & Hoyer, 2017, p. 3). Another less commonly used definition by Jehangir (2010) defines FGC students as “[low-income] students whose parents do not have bachelor’s degrees” (p. 16). Despite varying definitions of FGC students, there is a shared common experience of having limited familial context for pursuing higher education credentials (Davis, 2010; Jehangir, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2004). This study focuses on Black and Hispanic FGC graduates whose parents did not attain an undergraduate degree before the student completed their bachelor’s degrees, recognizing the impact that a parent with at least a bachelor’s degree can have on the college-to-career transition outcomes of students and graduates (Eismann, 2016; Maietta, 2016; Parks-Yancy, 2012).

First-generation college student profile.

First-generation college students face enormous challenges in pursuit of college credentials and career success (Chen & Caroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Eismann, 2016; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Galina, n.d.; Tate et al., 2015). These students represent about 64% of undergraduate students; 34% are the first in their family to attend college and an additional 28% have parents with some postsecondary education but no undergraduate
degree (NCES, 2015). Toutkoushian, Stollberg, Assistant, & Slaton (2015) estimated that the FGC student population ranges from 22% to 77%, a significant share of the total college student population. Davis (2010) projects that future college student enrollment “will be made up mostly of first-generation students for the next 10 to 15 years or more” (p. 14).

First-generation college students are disproportionately Black and Hispanic. According to a report by NCES (2015), using data of students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions during the 2011-2012 academic year, FGC students, (defined as those whose parents had not attained a bachelor’s degree) represented 72% of the Black student population, 75% of Hispanic students, and 56% of White students (p. 101). The study also reported an expanding population of immigrant FGC students and FGC students who spoke English as a second language (PNPI, 2016).

Regardless of the definition used, FGC students are diverse, touching every racial, ethnic, class, gender, age, religious, and sexual orientation demographic (Davis, 2010; Ishitani, 2003; Jehangir, 2010; NCES, 2015; Nunez, Cuccaro-Alamin, Carroll, & Riley, 1998; PNPI, 2016; Terenzini et al., 1996). First-generation college students are more likely than their non-FGC peers to be older, female, low-income, and part-time students. They are also more likely to attend for-profit higher education institutions and be employed while taking college courses (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; NCES, 2015, 2016; PNPI, 2016; Ward et al., 2012). First-generation college students are less likely to attend elite colleges and universities where some of the most “beneficial alumni networks and connections” (Tate et al., 2015, p. 295) are developed and later leveraged for career advancement.
DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, and Tran (2011) found that FGC students, defined as students whose parents did not earn college degrees, struggle to degree completion. DeAngelo et al. analyzed data of a nationwide population of students entering college in 2004 and found six-year bachelor’s degree completion rates of 50% for FGC students compared to 64% for students whose parents hold at least a bachelor’s degree. College completion rates were lower for Blacks and Hispanics than for other students, although the gaps in completion rates between Black and Hispanic FGC and non-FGC students were somewhat smaller. Six-year graduation rates were 9.2 percentage points lower for Black first-generation (35.4%) than Black non-first-generation (44.6%) students, and 6.9 percentage points lower for Hispanic first-generation (48%) than Hispanic non-first-generation (54.9%) students (DeAngelo et al., 2011).

**First-generation college students career influences.**

Family relations (e.g., parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles) have the potential to influence the careers of college students and graduates (Fouad, Cotter, Fitzpatrick, Kantamneni, Carter & Bernfeld, 2010; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016; Schultheiss et al., 2001; Tate et al., 2015; Whiston & Keller, 2004). Fouad et al. (2010) noted that family can provide “role modeling and emotional support [and can] have a stronger influence on career development than peers” (p. 276). For FGC students and graduates these findings may mean that their parents are not able to provide the same level of career modeling and career development influence as parents who completed bachelor’s degrees (Eismann, 2016; Tate et al., 2015). Consequently, FGC students and graduates, who lack parents with bachelor’s degrees, may be at a disadvantage during the college-to-career transition. FGC students—individuals who
often come from low-income, working class households (Jehangir, 2010; NCES, 2015) and have parents working hourly low-wage jobs—will likely not have parents working in the professional positions that FGC bachelor’s degree recipients seek when transitioning from college to career.

FGC students may also struggle to find a place of belonging and support on college campuses. FGC students often report feelings of isolation and alienation from peers and family alike when they seek to advance their careers (Bonaparte, Ku, Liao, Giffen, Blair, Rouse & Hyde, 2014; Davis, 2010; DeRosa et al., 2014; Jehangir, 2010; Leis, 2016; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016; Owens et al., 2010; Storlie et al., 2015; Tate et al, 2015). First-generation college students report that family and friends, a critical support system, are unable to appreciate the time and effort required to achieve the successful career outcomes for which they strive (Davis, 2010; Tate et al., 2015). The career strategy information, job search skills, and social networks needed to secure employment are limited for many FGC students’ families (Eismann, 2016; Olson, 2014; Tate et al., 2015; Parks-Yancy, 2012).

FGC students often function at the intersectionality of a myriad of identities, as they seek to navigate through the many facets of their lives. Because of the various challenges that FGC students face and the competing responsibilities they often hold during college, FGC students less frequently participate in campus-based co-curricular and student engagement activities than their non-first-generation peers (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2003; Jehangir, 2010; Olson, 2014, 2016; Ward et al., 2012). Consequently, they often fail to develop the social networks and gain access to critical information and resources that could facilitate their college-to-career
transition (De Janasz & Forret, 2008; Olson, 2014, 2016; Parks-Yancy, 2006, 2012; Storlie et al., 2015; Tate et al., 2015). By not prioritizing campus engagement and relationship building, many Black and Hispanic FGC students and graduates may be inadvertently undermining their own college-to-career transition (Eismann, 2016; Olson, 2014, 2016; Parks-Yancy, 2006, 2012; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016; Tate et al., 2015).

Maietta (2016) of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) asserted, based on a report highlighting the career development needs of first-generation college students, that, “Starting and navigating the career planning process is unfamiliar territory for many students, but it can be undoubtedly overwhelming for first-generation (FG) college students” (p. 1). The college-to-career transition experience can be even more challenging for FGC students because of the lack of access to the “hidden job market” (access to or knowledge about positions that are not advertised) that campus-based relationships and networks could have provided (Eismann, 2016; Gallup, 2016; Maietta, 2016; Parks-Yancy, 2012; Tate et al., 2015). Tate (2015) reported, in a study exploring internal and external factors affecting the career development experience of FGC students, that FGC students had access to fewer career-related networks than their non-FGC student peers.

In another study, Gallup, partnering with Purdue University and Lumina Foundation, conducted a three-year national survey (Gallup-Purdue Index Study), to assess the long-term success of college graduates pursuing “great jobs and great lives” (Gallup, 2016, p. 1). In the third year, the Gallup-Purdue survey examined students’ post-college perspectives about the value of their campus-based career-related services and
experiences. The survey of 11,000 adults, age 18 or older with at least a bachelor’s degree was conducted between August and October 2016. The findings revealed that FGC students were less likely to visit career services, network with faculty regarding job search connections, and leverage campus resources than their non-FGC peers. However, once FGC students visited career services and became familiar with its offerings they found the services to be useful. Additionally, the 2016 Gallup-Purdue Index study reported that individuals from racial/ethnic minority groups visited career services more frequently and rated their experiences more positively than their White peers.

In another study, examining the career influences of FGC students, Parks-Yancy (2012) explored how 58 low-income, Black college students, who were predominantly first-generation college students, “obtained social capital resources from university contacts to set and achieve career goals” (p. 510). The study found that the students had limited insight into career options and failed to use the information, connections, and resources available to them through university contacts because they did not understand the value of formal and informal resources, information, and relationships on their careers. Parks-Yancy (2012) found that the students’ job search outcomes improved when they leveraged the social, collegial, and professional networks as well as the “information, resources, and influence” they developed during their college experience (p. 510).

Tate et al. (2015) explored the “external influences on, and internal beliefs” (p. 294) about the career development process of 15 FGC students from a large, public university in the Southeastern region of the United States. Of the 15 FGC students, five were Black and three were Hispanic. The authors found that family relationships were
strong motivators for FGC students to pursue career advancement. Although many of the parents did not have access to professional networks to share with their students, parents provided emotional support and encouragement. This contribution is demonstrated in one student’s account, “My mom always told me do something that makes you happy, I want you to have a better life, not just do something like become a doctor so you can make more money” (Tate et al., 2015, p. 300).

Some FGC students articulated frustration with their parents’ lack of knowledge about navigating the college-to-career transition process, however. One student in the Tate et al. (2015) study reflected on her college-to-career challenges: “You do not really know how to go into the work force, like my mom, she has been like a cook most of her whole life” (p. 301). This quote suggests the limited career benefits that FGC students gain from parental professional and career networks. In the Tate et al. (2015) study, FGC students described their belief that they needed to work harder than other students to build a network. They further shared that they were intimidated by the prospect of reaching out to people outside of their familiar environment for fear of rejection or not knowing what to say (De Janasz & Forret, 2008). Consequently, FGC students in this study retreated from the campus-based social engagement resources that can facilitate college-to-career transitions and did not get involved in the co-curricular activities, clubs, and other events that could have helped expand their social and career network.

Tate et al. (2015) also reported that many FGC students see themselves as “more motivated, appreciative of opportunities, self-reliant, and adaptable” (p. 305) compared to their non-FGC peers. Tate and colleagues argued that the FGC students in their study perceived that their life experiences gave them “unique strengths” (p. 303) that they
leveraged for degree completion. Tate et al. (2015) asserted that acknowledgement of the utility of “strengths” (p.305) can replace the default deficit-based model that marginalizes vulnerable populations with a strengths-based approach. Tate et al. further posited that FGC students used their challenges and difficulties to fortify resolve and amplify grit, both believed to be necessary competencies for degree completion and college-to-career transition.

Prior research documents the lack of a sense of belonging, low confidence, difficulty navigating unfamiliar environments, low rates of degree completion and other challenges that FGC students encounter during their higher educational pursuits (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011; NCES, 2015). It is reasonable to posit that FGC students and graduates may experience similar challenges in the college-to-career transition experience. This study builds on Tate et al.’s (2015) exploratory study and the research by Olson (2014, 2016), Parks-Yancy (2012), Raque-Bogdan & Lucas (2016) and others to understand the college-to-career transition of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates.

**Employment Outcomes for First-Generation College Graduates**

Black and Hispanic FGC graduates often struggle to transition from college to work, even after acquiring high-demand bachelor’s degrees. The findings from researchers (Aronson et al., 2015; Becker, 1957, 1992; Eismann, 2016; Gaddis, 2015; Gould & Kroeger, 2017; Guryan & Charles, 2013; Nunley, Pugh, Romero & Seals, 2014; Olson, 2014, 2016; O’Neill, 1990; Parks-Yancy, 2012; Storlie et al., 2015; Tate et al., 2015) examining various human capital (e.g., quality of college attended, class, GPA, access to professional networks and resources) and discriminatory factors that may play a
Attainment of an undergraduate degree does not exempt Black and Hispanic college graduates from averaging higher unemployment rates than their White peers with comparable periods of professional work experience. Gould and Kroeger (2017), analyzing Current Population Survey (CPS) data between 1989-2017, reported that the unemployment rates for Black and Hispanic college graduates consistently remained higher than that of their White peers during the noted 28-year period, except on two occasions. In March 1995, the Black college graduate unemployment rate (5.2%) fell to its lowest point during this period and lower than the rates of Whites (5.4%) and Hispanics (7.9%) at the same time. In August 2004, the unemployment rate for Hispanic college graduates (4.7%) dropped to its lowest point during this period and was lower than the rates at that time for Whites (5.3%) and Blacks (7.7%). Differences in unemployment rates between Black and Hispanic college graduates and their White peers are striking given the similarities in college education, work experience, and age (Gould & Kroeger, 2017). While the reasons for the differences in unemployment rates may
extend beyond race and ethnicity (e.g. quality of education, social networks, parental education, career interests, etc.), the lack of parity in the college-to-career transition outcomes of Black and Hispanic college graduates is undeniable.

In 2011, after the end of the Great Recession, the unemployment rate for Black college graduates skyrocketed to 20.7%, more than twice the then-rate of 8.5% for Whites college graduates (Gould & Kroeger, 2017). The Hispanic college graduate unemployment rate also soared to 13.6% at that same point in time in 2011, after reaching its peak of 14.4% in 2010 (Gould & Kroeger, 2017). It took another five years, before the unemployment rate of Black college graduates fell below the 9.0% recession-period peak for Whites, finally dropping to 8.9% in 2016. In February 2017, the unemployment rates for Black and Hispanic college graduates dropped to 8.0% and 6.8%, respectively. However, when compared to the much lower unemployment rate of 4.9% for their White peers, it is evidence of racial/ethnic employment disparities. Gould and Kroeger (2017) suggest that the unemployment differences are attributed to forces “such as discrimination or unequal access to the informal networks that often lead to job opportunities” (p. 14).

Gaddis (2015) asserted that “racial inequities” (p. 1) persist in employment outcomes among Black college graduates throughout the U.S. labor-market, even for graduates of elite higher education institutions. Gaddis conducted a research study to evaluate differences in employment outcomes of Black and White college graduates from “elite top-ranked universities versus high-ranked but less selective institutions” (p. 1451). Gaddis, using a matched-pairs design, sent applications to 1,008 jobs located in three regions across the United States which were posted on national job boards. The study
found that employment rates for Black college graduates from elite top-ranked universities were like White college graduate rates from high-ranked but less selective institutions (Gaddis, 2015). In addition, the research revealed that employers offered Black college graduates from elite top-ranked universities lower salaries and less prestigious positions than they offered White college graduates from high ranked but less selective institutions. Gaddis concluded: “These racial differences suggest that a bachelor’s degree, even one from an elite institution, cannot fully counteract the importance of race in the labor market. Thus, both discrimination and differences in human capital contribute to racial economic inequality” (p. 1451).

Nunley, Pugh, Romero, and Seals (2014) also found unequal employment outcomes for Black and White college graduates. Nunley et al. (2015), seeking “to determine the extent to which discrimination can explain the (un)employment gap between White and Black college graduates” (p. 1), developed over 9,000 fictitious résumés and submitted them for positions posted on internet job boards between January and August 2013. Signaling the race and ethnicity of candidates, the résumés contained White- or Black-sounding names with qualitatively and quantitatively similar backgrounds. The authors assigned the résumés of the college graduates traditional business, like finance, marketing, and management, or arts and sciences like biology, history, and psychology, majors (p. 2).

Nunley et al. (2014) found disparate employer responses to résumés from Black and White candidates. Résumés with Black-sounding names were 14% less likely to be invited to an interview than résumés of White-sounding names. Because the profiles were identical in all ways except for the names, the findings “suggest that preferences for
White candidates provide the underlying motivation for discrimination rather than beliefs about unobserved differences in the skill distribution between White and Black job seekers” and concluded “taste-based discrimination as the most likely explanation for [the] findings” (p. 3).

**First-generation college graduate employment outcomes.**

Few studies have examined employment outcomes for FGC graduates like Aronson et al. (2015), Choy (2002), Eismann (2016), Olson (2010, 2014, 2016), Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, Storlie et al. (2015), and Tate et al., (2015). In a then-groundbreaking study, Choy (2002) found no difference in employment outcomes between FGC students, defined by Choy as students whose parents never earned bachelor’s degrees, and their non-FGC student peers. The continued relevance of these findings, however, is likely limited. Choy used data from the 1999-2000 academic year which is more than a decade ago. The sample in the Choy study is likely less diverse than today given the demographic shifts that have occurred in the United States over the last decade (Frey, 2015).

More recent studies (e.g., Aronson et al., 2015; Eismann, 2016; Olson, 2014, 2016; Storlie et al., 2015) show that FGC students, particularly minorities, experience challenges in their college-to-career transition experience. Aronson et al. (2015) reported that FGC graduates struggled to find employment after graduating from college. Aronson et al. analyzed 7,054 closed- and open-ended responses to a survey of undergraduate graduates from the 2012 class of the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Aronson et al. (2015) found “that women and first-generation college graduates fared the worst in terms of their employment status” (p. 1,112). In the survey, college graduates noted that they
believed better college-to-career transition support could have improved their post-college employment outcomes.

Eismann (2016), reporting findings from a recent NACE survey of 5,013 graduating undergraduate seniors from the class of 2016, found that first-generation students had less job search success than their non-FGC peers in nearly every stage of the job search process. From developing job search strategies to submitting applications, receiving to accepting job offers, and negotiating offers to having a job in hand, FGC seniors generally had less favorable results than their non-FGC peers. The NACE survey, conducted between February and April 2016 prior to graduation for these students, included 1,925 students whose parents did not possess at least a bachelor’s degree and 3,088 students whose parents who did possess at least a bachelor’s degree. From the survey, Eismann found that FGC students applied to jobs less frequently than their non-FGC student peers (79% vs. 88%) and that smaller shares of FGC than non-FGC students received job offers (43% vs. 49%). Additionally, FGC students were less likely to accept job offers than their non-FGC peers (58% vs. 68%) In the end, FGC students achieved less job search success, as only 25% of FGC but 33% of non-FGC students had a job in hand at the time of the survey (Eismann, 2016).

Eismann (2016) reported that FGC and non-FGC graduating seniors used “job-search resources to the same degree and with the same level of effectiveness—with a few notable exceptions” (p. 17). Smaller shares of FGC students than non-FGC students used their parent and/or relative resource in their job search process (55% vs. 66%). Eismann (2016) posited that parents of FGC students lacked the “same frame of reference for launching a job search” (p. 17) as non-FGC students, thus limiting the parent’s ability to
serve as an effective job-search resource. Consequently, familial networks that may have
provided a competitive job search advantage to non-FGC students compared to FGC
students.

Eismann (2016) also noted that racial diversity among FGC students in the survey
is greater than non-FGC students. Drawing from data collected by others, Eismann
(2016) stated, “Diverse ethnic backgrounds tend to view themselves as belonging to a
collective culture where unity takes precedence” (p. 17). Eismann postulated that job
search results for FGC students may be adversely impacted because of their lack of a
professional network from which to gain career-related resources, information, and
access to people with job connections.

The other job search resource that appeared to be used differently by FGC and
non-FGC students was career services support. Eismann (2016) reported that FGC
students were more inclined to use online resources such as “virtual career fairs, articles
in newspapers/magazines, and ads in publications/magazines” (p. 17) than their non-FGC
student peers who were more likely to use in-person resources such as “on-campus
employer representatives and on-campus career/job fairs” (p. 17). The FGCS gravitated
toward online career resources where relationships are more difficult to develop than
their non-FGC peers who were more likely to use in-person resources where they could
develop relationships and build networks that could support their job search goals.

Eismann (2016) concluded that, “concern for first-generation students’ post-
graduate transition into the work force is well-founded. Job-search success rates of first-
generation students, at least as measured by the survey, are significantly lower than those
of their counterparts” (“Addressing First-Generation Student Needs”, para.1). She
attributed the low job search success for FGC students to three factors: (a) misalignment between actual and expected job offers by FGC students resulting in higher job offer rejection rates by FGC students than non-FGC peers; (b) lack of parental and familial networks to provide job-search support, and (c) over-reliance on online career services resources.

Additionally, Gould and Kroeger (2017) posited that employment outcomes for Black and Hispanic college graduates may in part be lower than for other groups because of a lack of “informal professional networks that often lead to job opportunities” (p. 14). FGC graduates may also face similar challenges. Inadequate access to professional networks, resources, and information that connect individuals to the “hidden job market” may reduce employment outcomes of FGC graduates. From her survey results, Eismann (2016) asserted that the parents of FGC students are unable to “serve as job-search resources and role models” (p. 17) because they “do not have the same frame of reference for launching a job search” (p. 17) and speculated that this difference may contribute to the difference in employment outcomes between FGC and non-FGC students and graduates. In other words, intergenerational social capital, defined as networks, resources, and information from which one can derive benefits, may be transmitted to non-FGC students by their parents, thereby providing an advantage in the job search process that FGC students do not have (Bourdieu, 1997, 1984, 1990; Kantamneni et al., 2018; Ossenkop et al., 2015; Storlie et al., 2015). Specifically, FGC students lack access to the social and professional network linked to the “hidden job market” where otherwise inaccessible job-related information, resources, and contacts are shared (Hatala & Yamkovenko, 2016, p. 550).
Forces influencing employment outcomes.

Literature on the reasons for differences in employment outcomes is rich. Some researchers (Heckman, 1998; O’Neill, 1990) attribute racial and ethnic differences to factors such as quality of education, college major, GPA, social class, social capital, and personal taste, asserting that the labor market will create “winners” and “losers” based on supply and demand forces. These researchers assume that the labor market will reward college graduates with a job if they possess the education, training, and skills demanded in the market place, regardless of race, ethnicity, or parental educational level.

Others acknowledge that historical, systemic racial, and ethnic barriers contribute to bias and discrimination in the workplace, often hindering the college-to-career transition of people of color (Becker, 1957; Gaddis, 2015; Gould & Kroeger, 2017; Gushue & Mejia-Smith, 2017; Nunley et al., 2014). While human capital forces can differentiate skills and “value” in the labor market, other forces (e.g. parental education, social and professional networks, socio-economic status, family background, access to “hidden jobs”) may have some influence over the employment outcomes of individuals in certain communities, such as Blacks and Hispanics (Eismann, 2016; Lent & Brown, 2006, 2017; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2000; Parks-Yancy, 2012; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016; Tate et al., 2015). Whatever the reason for the differences, the variance in unemployment rates between Black and Hispanic college graduates and their White college graduate peers reveals the under-utilization of college-educated talent in the labor market. The challenges faced by Black and Hispanic FGC graduates transitioning from college to career are real (Eismann, 2016; Gaddis, 2015; Gould and Kroeger, 2017; Tate
et al., 2015) and any barrier hindering the employment of Black and Hispanic FGC college graduates should be eliminated.

**Human Capital Theory**

Human capital theory posits that investments in education will translate into higher productivity, and higher productivity is rewarded in the labor market by employment, compensation, and other workplace benefits (Becker, 1975; Perna, 2003; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Although human capital theory argues that noneconomic societal and individual benefits can be derived from investments in education, this dissertation focuses on the individual career (employment) benefit of education.

The empirical data is clear that higher education also contributes to noneconomic benefits such as a healthier society, a safer community, increased civic involvement, and reduction in the need for public assistance programs (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016), as well as economic benefits such as higher wages, employment, and socioeconomic mobility (Becker, 1992, 1994; Perna, 2003; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Most students, including FGC students, invest in higher education for the personal economic benefits they expect to receive as postulated by the human capital theory (Becker, 1992; Carnevale, Rose & Cheah, 2011; Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2013; Carnevale, Cheah & Hanson, 2015). Simply put, students, including Black and Hispanic FGC students and graduates, expect investments in higher education to advance their career goals and improve their socioeconomic standing.

Investments in higher education may not always realize positive or equitable returns because of the impact that other forces may have on employment outcomes (Becker, 1957, 1992; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). In part, variances in outcomes may
be due to differences in skills, quality of education, age, health, and other factors including discrimination. Becker (1957), in his seminal book, *The Economics of Discrimination*, noted that education credentials alone will not safeguard one from discriminatory labor market practices, as employers, employees, and customers may make taste-based labor market decisions based on their racial and ethnic preferences, thereby disadvantaging another community.

Becker (1975, 1992, 1994) developed the taste-based discrimination model as a framework to understand the impact of labor market discrimination (based on race/ethnicity and other demographic characteristics) and to explain wage gaps across race and ethnicity. With the taste-based discrimination model, Becker (1975, 1992, 1994) posits that employers have preferences for whom they do and do not want to interact with and they exercise those preferences by discriminating against those groups. Some employers prefer to pay a financial penalty rather than hire individuals from certain groups, even if individuals in those groups possess the education, skills, and knowledge required to complete the job duties and be productive workers.

Another model for understanding economic discrimination in the labor market and the discriminatory forces that influence human capital theory principles is the statistical discrimination approach pioneered by Arrow and Phelps in the 1970s (Guryan & Charles, 2013). Different from the taste-based discrimination model of Becker, Arrow and Phelps posit that workplace discrimination is based on perceptions about others. Discrimination is based on stereotypes stemming from one’s interpretation of a pattern of behaviors, and these stereotypes inform decisions when other pertinent information is
unavailable. Guryan and Charles (2013) summarized the two economic approaches to understanding discrimination:

In taste-based discrimination models, discrimination results from some sort of animus towards members of an out-group that takes the form of a willingness to pay a price to avoid interaction with members of that group. In statistical discrimination models, discrimination takes the form of stereotyping based on group membership that result from imperfect information. (p. F418)

Whether the taste-based discrimination model by Becker or the statistical discrimination model by Arrow and Phillips, workplace discrimination places a heavy burden on individuals from certain communities, including Blacks and Hispanics. Both approaches suggest that employees who are discriminated against may simply have to work around the discrimination by choosing a different employer or work harder than others for the same wages. Both approaches point out unfairness in workplace hiring decisions and illuminate the contradiction in the human capital theory, which posits that workers will be rewarded with employment and higher wages if they invest in education.

**Social Cognitive Career Theory**

Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) provides a framework for “understanding the processes through which people develop educational/vocational interests, make career-relevant choices, and achieve performances of varying quality in their educational and occupational pursuits” (Lent et al., 1994, as cited by Lent et al., 2002, p. 62). Lent offers two levels of analysis in the SCCT. Grounded in Bandura’s (1986) general social cognitive theory, SCCT posits that behavioral variables (e.g., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals) inform career interests, choices, and decision-making (Lent et al., 2000). Self-efficacy and outcome expectations activate the personal agency
needed to attain desired career-related performance outcomes. Lent defines this phase of the career-related analysis as the “first level” (p. 36).

The “second level of analysis” (p. 36), Lent (2006) postulates, is “the paths through which several additional sets of variables—such as physical attributes (e.g., sex and race), features of the environment, and particular learning experiences—influence career-related interests and choice behavior” (p. 36). SCCT provides a framework for understanding the academic and career influences on the complex, multi-dimensional lives of the FGC graduate participants in this study. The SCCT model provides a prism through which to examine the interrelated behavioral, personal, and/or environmental forces that may be influencing the employment outcomes of the participants in this study. The SCCT framework has the following five core constructs: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, personal goals, career interest, and contextual supports and barriers (Lent et al., 2006).

The first construct, self-efficacy beliefs, describes whether one does or does not believe in one’s ability to accomplish a specific task. Citing Bandura, Lent et al. (2006) described self-efficacy beliefs as “people’s judgements of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (p. 15). Different from the competencies of confidence or self-esteem, self-efficacy beliefs are a “dynamic set of self-beliefs that are linked to particular performance domains and activities” (Lent et al., 2006, p. 15, citing Lent, 2005, p. 104). Self-efficacy beliefs can change; they are not stagnant. Self-efficacy beliefs can be positive or negative, depending on influences such as other people, environmental factors, and personal behavior.
The second construct, outcome expectations, refers to the results or consequences of performing specific actions. Different from self-efficacy which looks at an individual’s belief about accomplishing a specific task, the construct of outcome expectations focuses on the consequences that are believed to result from performing a given task. Individuals who are focused on outcome expectations will ask themselves: What will happen if I do this or that? Past learning experiences and perceived results impact an individual’s outcome expectations. Individuals tend to pursue activities they believe will lead to positive results; and, conversely, avoid activities they perceive will cause negative consequences.

The third construct of SCCT, personal goals, is the belief that individuals are best able to organize and steer their own behavior as well as sustain momentum through good and challenging times. Personal goals are defined as “the intention to engage in a particular activity or to produce a particular outcome” (Bandura, 1986, as cited in Lent et al., 2006, p. 17). SCCT asserts that personal goals, self-efficacy beliefs, and outcome expectations are inextricably linked, and that the three constructs impact an individual’s career-related development and choices (Lent et al., 2006).

The fourth construct, career interests, refers to an individual’s “pattern of likes, dislikes, and indifferences regarding different activities” (Lent et al., 2006, p. 17). Career interests, a key career development construct, may be influenced by contextual environmental factors including culture, values, family, life experiences, social class, and parental educational status. SCCT asserts that direct and indirect exposure to careers, influenced by contextual factors as far back as childhood and adolescence years, can expand or restrict career interests. Environmental factors (e.g., socioeconomic status,
community) can influence career exposure which may in turn impact career interests, self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal (including career) goals.

The fifth construct, contextual supports, and barriers recognizes that there are “proximal contextual variables—in particular, environmental supports (facilitative influences) and barriers (obstacles)—that people anticipate will accompany their goal pursuit” (Lent et al., 2006, p. 18). SCCT divides the contextual, environmental influences into two categories, in accordance with their proximity to the career decision: “distal, background contextual factors” (Lent et al., 2000, p. 37) and “proximal category of contextual influences” (p. 37).

In addition to focusing on cognitive-person variables (e.g., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals), SCCT acknowledges that personal inputs (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age), contextual factors, both distal and proximal, (e.g., family, FGC status, education, socioeconomic status, access to social networks, resources, and information), and learning and development experiences (e.g., college and career preparation programming, mentoring, career coaching, internships, job shadowing) can influence self-efficacy beliefs, personal goals, career interests and outcome expectations (Lent et al., 2000). SCCT is a useful model to deepen understanding of the career experiences of FGC students and gain insight into the college-to-career choices, decisions, aspirations, and outcomes of the selected participants (Lent, 2016).

First-generation college students and social cognitive career theory.

Several researchers (Olson, 2010, 2014, 2016; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016) have employed the SCCT framework to examine the career experiences of FGC graduates. Olson (2014), in a study exploring how SCCT could aid with the career
development support of FGC graduates, reported, “SCCT framework creates space for the FGC graduate to explore career self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals as a way to navigate the challenges created and opportunities provided by his or her educational attainment and early career development” (p. 209). SCCT posits that contextual forces such as family and parental support, race and ethnicity, and the level of access to professional networks can be either a support or barrier to career success.

Distal and proximal contextual forces can either facilitate or derail the career of students. Olson (2014) noted, “Distal influences may continue to shape the career-related learning for the FGC graduate by fostering a sense of self-efficacy related to post-college work and learning experiences” (p. 208). On the other hand, being a first-generation college graduate from a low-income family can strain the self-efficacy and outcome expectations of FGC graduates as these students pioneer new career terrain in pursuit of their career goals in search for upward socioeconomic mobility. Olson (2014) noted:

SCCT provides a lens for understanding how context can shape career, acting as support or barrier, and exerting direct or indirect influence on goals and interests. It can provide a vocabulary and framework for helping the FGC graduate, finding value in multiple approaches, and developing strategies for melding them. (p. 209)

In another application of the SCCT framework, Raque-Bogdan, and Lucas (2016) compared the career development characteristics of more than 2,000 incoming first-generation college students with their non-FGC student peers and found “significant differences between the two groups, and the importance of college self-efficacy and college outcome expectation for the career aspirations of first-generation college students” (p. 248). However, no differences were found between the “reported levels of career-related parental support, college self-efficacy, college outcome expectation, their
efficacy for coping with barriers, and career aspirations” of FGC and non-FGC students (p. 258). Generally, career-related parental support was similar for FGC and non-FGC students.

Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) also found that FGC students of lower or working-class status reported less career-related parental support than upper-middle-class students, an indication that further research into the role of socioeconomic status on career-related parental support is warranted. The study also indicated that FGC students were optimistic about their career-related goals despite their reported perception that they encountered more educational and career barriers than their non-FGC student peers; they perceived racial discrimination as a career barrier (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016).

Additionally, Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) found that self-efficacy and outcome expectation beliefs were more predictors of career aspirations for FGC students than parents’ social class, career-related support, and expectations of degree attainment. Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) reported, “Self-efficacy for coping with barriers functions differently for FGs than it does for other minority groups on campus” (p. 258). Raque-Bogdan and Lucas noted that career aspirations for FGC students were based on their confidence in completing their college-related activities and attaining their bachelor’s degrees.

FGC students disproportionately relied on themselves for developing their career aspirations rather than building social and professional networks that often facilitate career development and advancement. Consequently, FGC students were at a disadvantage when they faced the inevitable challenges that come with any career. Instead of tapping into their networks for support, information and resources, FGC
students tended to conclude that they could not be successful after depleting their two primary career aspiration sources (i.e., self-efficacy and outcome expectations). As a result of inadequate external support, Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) found that FGC students were more inclined to give up and stop pursuing their career aspirations compared to their non-FGC student peers who possessed various sources of career aspiration (e.g., “career-related parental support, perceptions of barriers, efficacy for coping with barriers, and students expected degree level, as well as their college self-efficacy and college outcome expectations” (p.259)) from which to draw strength when they doubted their self-efficacy and ability to achieve their outcome expectations. Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) posited that college self-efficacy and outcome expectations can be either beneficial or detrimental to the college-to-career experience of FGC and non-FGC students, depending on the degree to which other sources of career aspiration are available.

Both Olson (2014) and Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) identified an important contextual challenge that FGC students encounter: negotiating between individualistic and collectivist cultures. Olson (2014) and Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) noted that FGC graduates struggle with navigating expectations of individualistic cultures, where decisions are person-centric, and the collectivist cultures inherited from their parents, where decision making is shared with family and community, including career-related decisions. Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) reported that some FGC students cut family and parent ties to fit in with their U.S.-based, individualistic college cultures. In some cases, FGC students needed “to be persuaded of the importance of retaining the association between their parental support and their career aspirations” (p. 259), in other
words, remaining engaged with the collectivist culture from which they draw emotional
strength and support for achieving their career goals.

**Literature Review Summary**

The review of literature related to the college-to-career transitions of Black and Hispanic FGC students revealed several findings. Unemployment rates are higher for Black and Hispanic college graduates than for Whites, a difference that may be explained in part by discrimination and bias (Becker, 1975, 1992; Gaddis, 2015; Gould & Kroeger, 2017). Non-FGC students tend to have more positive job search results than FGC students (Aronson et al., 2015; Eismann, 2016; Olson, 2014, 2016; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016; Storlie et al., 2015).

FGC graduates also do not have the same access to the professional networks and resources as non-FGC graduates, a difference that may contribute to less positive job search and employment outcomes (Eismann, 2016; Gould & Kroeger, 2017; Maietta, 2016; Olson, 2014; Parks-Yancy, 2006, 2012; Storlie et al., 2015; Tate et al., 2015). The SCCT framework posits that career interests, goals, and actions can be influenced by innate person inputs as well as distal and proximal contextual forces. In other words, career choices, decisions, and outcomes are not made in isolation of personal and environmental forces unique to an individual (Lent, 2016; Lent et al., 2002; Lent & Brown, 2006, 2017; Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Gushe & Mejia-Smith, 2017, Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016).

There are several notable limitations to the research. First, the multiple definitions of FGC students (Bonaparte, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2003; Jehangir, 2010; Nuñez et al., 1998) make it difficult to compare findings across studies. Additionally,
prior research does not consider the potential impact for FGC students when extended family members have attained a college degree. Nor does the literature consider FGC students who are working while studying and transition from college-to-career in a non-traditional manner (Carnevale, Cheah & Hanson, 2015; Davis, 2015; NCES, 2015). Black and Hispanic families, and by extension first-generation college students who are predominately people of color, tend to come from collectivist cultures (Eismann, 2016, Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016), with an “it-takes-a-village” approach to raising children and making family and career decisions. Little is known about the college-to-career transition of individuals whose parents have not attained a degree but who live with an extended family member (e.g., grandparent) who completed an undergraduate degree.

Limited research is available about employment outcomes for individuals who are Black or Hispanic and FGC graduates. Although several studies in this literature review indicated the employment challenges of Black and Hispanic college graduates (Gaddis, 2015; Gould & Kroeger, 2017; Gushue & Mejia-Smith, 2017; Means, et al., 2016) and the difficulties faced by first-generation college graduates (Aronson et al., 2015; Eismann, 2016; Olson, 2014, 2016, Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016; Storlie et al., 2015), few have considered the experiences of individuals who are at the intersection of these two identities.

While many studies have examined access, retention, and graduation for FGC students (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001, 2002; Davis, 2010; Hinz, 2016; Liu, 2016; Moschetti, 2012; Nunez, et al., 1998; Oldfield, 2012; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Tym, McMillion, Barone & Webster, 2004) few have considered the post-college career transition, particularly for Black and Hispanic FGC students (Eismann, Owens et al.,
First-generation college students face significant challenges persisting from enrollment to graduation (Bui, 2002; DeAngelo et al., 2011; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996). Like other students, FGC students invest in higher education as a path to employment that will lead to a better life (Choy, 2001, 2002; Owens et al., 2010; Storlie et al., 2015). Although the benefit of bachelor’s degree attainment compared to a high school diploma or non-degree postsecondary credentials is indisputable (Carnevale et al., 2011, Carnevale et al., 2013, Carnevale et al., 2016; Deming, Yuchtman, Abulafi, Goldin, & Katz, 2016; Gallup, 2016; Perna, 2003, 2014), FGC students, particularly Blacks and Hispanics, struggle to attain undergraduate degrees (NCES, 2015, 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Skomsvold, 2015) and transition from college to career (Eismann, 2006; Gould & Kroeger, 2017; Maietta, 2016; Means et al., 2016; Olson, 2016).

The benefits posited by human capital theory appear to be constrained for Black and Hispanic college graduates (Gaddis, 2015; Gould & Kroeger, 2017; Storlie, et al., 2015). The forces influencing career advancement for FGC students who are Black and Hispanic, including discrimination, bias, and microaggressions should be further researched. Further research is needed to understand the forces that influence the college-to-career transition of Black and Hispanic FGC students, examine ways to improve employment outcomes for Black and Hispanic college graduates, and apply the social cognitive career theory to other populations, including Black and Hispanic first-generation college students and graduates.

College administrators and employers need to proactively prepare for a transformative demographic shift that will increase the share of the Black and Hispanic
population and workforce by 2050 (Colby & Orman, 2015; Frey, 2015), including FGC students who now comprise most enrollees on college campuses (NCES, 2015; PNPI, 2016) as well as expanding first-generation immigrant communities (NCES, 2017). The scarcity of research on Black and Hispanic FGC students and their college-to-career transition may be an indication that the longstanding marginalization of this community continues to exist. Additional research is needed to understand how to appropriately support and guide Black and Hispanic FGC college graduates as they transition from college to career as well as during the formative years of developing their careers. The results of this dissertation will provide insights to career services professionals, educators, and employers about the needs of Black and Hispanic FGC students who are first in their families to attain college degrees and pursue professional careers and who are a critical part of a growing diverse population that is projected to comprise an increasing share of the workforce in the not too distant future (Davis, 2010; Frey, 2015).
“What I know for sure is that speaking your truth is the most powerful tool we all have,” proclaimed Oprah Winfrey, Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient, global media leader, and philanthropist who is a Black first-generation college graduate (Gilbert and Latham, 2018, para. 4).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the research methodology used to address the research questions that enable the Black and Hispanic first-generation college graduates in this study to “speak their truth” about their college-to-career experiences. Information about the research design, participant recruitment and selection as well as data collection, analysis and validation is described in this chapter. Finally, in this chapter I provide the role of the researcher, assurances of ethical and trustworthy research standards as well as some of the limitations of this research study.

Research Design

This study explored the college-to-career transition experiences of 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduates who attained a bachelor’s degree from a U.S.-based public or private higher education institution prior to January 1, 2017. To gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of the selected participants, a qualitative research approach was employed to “empower individuals to share their stories,” (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Grounded in epistemological principles, I chose to conduct a qualitative study to document and make meaning of the college-to-career transition phenomenon as experienced by the Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study. This approach is structured (requiring a rigorous approach to data collection, data analysis, validation, and report writing), yet flexible (enabling open, authentic stories to be told by participants).
Ravitch and Carl (2016) noted: “Qualitative research attempts to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in their natural settings in ways that are contextualized and reflect the meaning that people make out of their own experiences” (p. 2). Seeking to understand the “common or shared” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81) college-to-career experiences as told by the 23 FGC college graduate participants in this study, the following research questions were explored:

1. What are the college-to-career experiences of selected Black and Hispanic FGC bachelor’s degree recipients?

2. What forces influenced the college-to-career experiences of the selected Black and Hispanic FGC bachelor’s degree recipients?

Participant Recruitment and Selection

I selected 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduates who participated in Management Leadership for Tomorrow (MLT). This organization was founded in 2002 by John Rice, a Harvard MBA graduate and successful corporate executive, who, yearning to see more diversity in corporate leadership, launched the nonprofit to assist in the career preparation and development of high-achieving (average 3.5 GPA) women and men from underrepresented communities, including Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans.

I recruited participants from the MLT Career Prep Program, one of five programs and initiatives dedicated to the career and leadership development of underrepresented minority talent. The MLT Career Prep Program provides an 18-month career preparation program to high performing college sophomores matriculating at U.S. higher education institutions. The MLT Career Prep Program offers one-on-one career coaching, in-person workshops, personalized job search strategies, and access to an extensive network of
alums and employers seeking to hire MLT participants, called Career Prep Fellows. MLT boasts a 98% job placement of Career Prep Fellows at the time that they graduate from their respective colleges or universities (MLT, Career Prep, n.d.).

In purposeful sampling, a sampling method used in qualitative research, participants who match the “core constructs and contexts of the research questions” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 128) are chosen to participate in the study. For this study, a core construct was the attainment of an undergraduate degree and a post-college career, defined as employment in a job linked to the attainment of one’s bachelor’s degree. Additionally, only participants in the Mid-Atlantic states were considered so that employment outcomes could be evaluated in contiguous labor markets experiencing similar workforce conditions.

I selected participants who were between the ages of 22 to 33 to capture the transition from college-to-career for traditional age students moving immediately from bachelor’s degree attainment into a career. All participants were required to have graduated by January 1, 2017, ensuring that participants had a minimum of nine months to transition from college-to-career before the interviews. All participants were U.S. citizens or residents, eliminating employment obstacles faced by graduates without the legal authority to work in the United States.

MLT invited 389 Career Prep Fellow alums (see Appendix A) whose profiles matched the research requirements to voluntarily participate in the study; the communication was adjusted periodically in accordance with Career Prep Fellow alum response. I selected the first 23 Fellows who met the research study requirements. Participants expressed interest by completing a candidate profile (Appendix B),
confirming they met all research qualifications, submitting a copy of their résumé, providing signed consent to participate in the study and reserving a tentative interview through an online scheduling software. All participants self-identified that they met all research requirements: 1) First-generation college graduate, defined as neither parent having a bachelor’s degree; (2) Black or Hispanic race/ethnicity; (3) Graduate of a four-year U.S.-based public or nonprofit private higher education institution; (4) Awarded at least an undergraduate degree prior to January 1, 2017; (5) A U.S. citizen or resident; (6) Between the ages of 22 to 33; (7) MLT Career Prep Fellow alum; and (8) Had lived and worked full-time within the Mid-Atlantic region defined as Washington DC, Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and West Virginia or within a metropolitan statistical area (MSA) adjoining at least one of the Mid-Atlantic states. I sought an equal number of self-identified male and female as well as Black and Hispanic participants. I conducted interviews between October 26 and November 26, 2017. Participants received a $50 gift certificate after completing verification documents, submitting their résumés, and participating in an interview. Participants also agreed to assist with follow-up inquiries, if needed.

The research participant criteria were established to explore the college-to-career transition experiences of a historically marginalized population that is projected to expand on college campuses and in workplaces across the United States (Davis, 2010; Frey, 2015). I originally sought to recruit participants from only the Washington, DC MSA, but was unable to recruit a sufficient number of MLT Career Prep alums who were Black and Hispanic FGC graduates. I later expanded the geographic requirement to include the Mid-Atlantic states where a significant population of qualified MLT
prospects lived and worked. To document the college-to-career transition experiences of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates who transitioned from college to a career, all participants were required to have completed their bachelor’s degree and worked full-time in a position linked to their undergraduate degree.

**Data Collection**

This section provides information about interview protocols and the safeguards employed to suspend, or at the very least, minimize my own personal biases and presuppositions as the research instrument.

This study strived to “determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The unit of analysis is the individual Black and Hispanic FGC graduate. While valuing the experience of each individual participant the analysis focused on the “common or shared” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81) college-to-career experience derived from the collective, stories told by the Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants. I examined the participants’ individual experiences to gain an understanding of the “common or shared” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81) college-to-career experience of the Black and Hispanic FGC graduates in this study. I conducted an in-depth one-on-one interview with each participant using a two-part interview protocol (Appendix C). Allowing the participant to lead the interview discussion, I only asked questions from the interview protocol inventory that amplified an understanding of the participants’ college-to-career experience; all questions in the inventory were not asked of the participant. I also assigned pseudonyms to participants in order to safeguard their identity.
I encouraged each participant to share as much or as little as they felt comfortable about their college-to-career experiences. Of the 23 interviews, two were conducted in person at a public library, four by video using Skype and 17 by phone. Interviews were primarily conducted in the evening after work or on the weekend (Saturday and Sunday). Interviews lasted between 60 to 75 minutes, with most taking 60 minutes. A couple of interviews lasted nearly 90 minutes. I also aimed to achieve the trustworthiness Lincoln and Guba (1985) described with the terms of “credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (as cited in Creswell, 2013, p. 246) by intentionally scheduling at least a 30-minute break between interviews so that I would not be emotionally drained during interviews, thereby ensuring that I was completely present and engaged in each interview.

To collect data from the participants, I listened actively and made every effort to suspend all judgment, thereby creating space for authentic stories to be told by the FGC graduates. I asked targeted, probing questions for clarification only, wanting to encourage participants to be open and honest as they shared their authentic experiences. All conversations were recorded and later transcribed using Rev.com. To protect the confidentiality and privacy of the information collected, I stored physical data in a private room and secured electronic files accordingly.

I used a two-part semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) to explore the college-to-career experience of the participants and understand the forces that influenced their transition. Part one examined the following three stages of the college-to-career experience: pre-college, during-college, and post-college. During the second part of the
interview protocol—reflection, I invited participants to reflect on their entire college-to-career experience.

The pre-college stage of the first part of the interview sought to gather contextual information about the background of the participants by exploring the following topics: family socioeconomic status, parental education and employment, participant’s motivation for college, early career aspirations, high school education, college preparation and admissions process, college funding source, and early work experience. The during-college stage of part one of the interview protocol focused on the college experience as well as the career development activities that facilitated transitioning from college to career. This stage of the interview examined the following topics: academic performance, campus fit, co-curricular engagement (e.g., clubs, study abroad, sports), family support, choosing a major, career preparation and development, campus-related work (e.g., internships, work study), job search strategies, employer recruitment process, and the leveraging of social, professional, and family networks during the job search.

The final stage of the first part of the interview—the post-college stage—sought to understand the participants’ career experiences after attaining a bachelor’s degree. The interview discussions homed in on the following topics: job satisfaction, job confidence, workplace fit, job retention, manager and colleague working relationships, professional network development, race in the workplace (e.g. discrimination and biases) as well as professional advancement, and career aspirations.

The second part of the interview, reflection, provided participants the opportunity to look back on their entire college-to-career experience and discuss the career-related lessons learned. This part of the interview explored the following topics: personal
definitions of career success, college-to-career expectations, the role that being a first-generation college graduate and/or first-generation immigrant did or did not play in their college-to-career experience, effective job search strategies, definition of success, interest in graduate school, lessons learned, and any other relevant missing information.

To encourage open and candid dialogue, I began each interview by sharing with participants that my interest in this research phenomenon stems from my personal background as a Black FGC graduate from a low-income family who successfully transitioned from college to career and who worked and grew up in Black and Hispanic communities. I also provided a brief overview of my family, academic and professional background. Because I shared my background and demonstrated vulnerability I believe that participants candidly opened-up during the interviews. Participants shared experiences that were rich in meaningful data.

**Data Analysis and Validation**

I employed the steps described by Creswell (2013) as “characteristics of a ‘good’ qualitative study” (p.53) to analyze data gathered in this study. I reviewed interviews and highlighted significant statements, organized data into “clusters of meaning,” coded data and developed “textural descriptions” of the participant’s statements and developed themes that capture the “essence” of the common or shared experiences (p. 82).

After collecting the data from the interviews, I reviewed the recordings and transcripts and highlighted “significant statements” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82) that provided insight into how participants experienced their respective college-to-career experiences. In qualitative studies, researchers, who have their own personal biases and suppositions, are research instruments exploring the phenomenon in question. To minimize the
influence of my own personal perspectives, I acknowledged and communicated my background to participants and continuously calibrated my findings with others. Keenly aware of my own positionality, I constantly evaluated my relationship to the phenomenon by discussing preliminary findings of the data collection and analysis with scholars, peers, colleagues, and documenting my reflection of the interviews in field notes. To further ensure that I captured the “essence” (Creswell, 2013, p.82) of participants’ stories, I shared the biographical descriptions (Appendix E) that I developed with the participants and invited them to verify that their individual statements accurately reflected their experiences and confirm that the brief did not jeopardize their anonymity.

To protect the privacy of the 23 participants, I assigned each a pseudonym which I shared with the FGC graduate participants and sought their input on their assigned pseudonym and meaning. To avoid the dehumanization that can occur when analyses are reduced to numbers and alphabets, I purposefully assigned culturally diverse pseudonyms that embody meanings reflecting “common or shared” (Creswell, 2013, p.81) characteristics or values articulated or demonstrated by participants during the interviews. More importantly, I intentionally picked pseudonyms rich with significance to counterbalance the feelings of invisibility alluded to by some Black and Hispanic first-generation college graduate participants in this study and experienced more broadly by many minoritized communities.

Ralph Ellison, in his seminal novel of 1952, The Invisible Man, described the invisibility that these hand-picked pseudonyms sought to negate: "I am a man [and woman] of substance, of flesh and bone...I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me...They see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their
imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me” (Ellison, 1952, p.7). The
purposively selected pseudonyms are intended to connote the invincibility, not
invisibility, of each of the 23 Black and Hispanic first-generation college graduates in this
study.

Examples of the names and meanings of pseudonyms assigned to the selected
participants include: Aaliyah, a female name of Arabic origin that means “sublime”;
Ricardo, a popular name for Spanish males that means “brave power”; Inyene an African
female name which means “wealth”, and; Victoria, a crowning name for females of
Hispanic and/or Black origin, defined as “victory”. Barack, a pseudonym given one of
the participants, is a common name for Black males which means “blessing” (Behind the
Name, n.d.); it is a Swahili name of Arabic origin and the name of the 44th President of
the United States—the first and only African American to hold this esteemed position of
the “leader of the free world”. A complete list of the pseudonyms and corresponding
meanings for the 23 FGC graduate participants in this study can be found in Table 1
(Babble, n.d.; Behind the Name, n.d.; Meaning of Names, n.d.).

Table 1. *Pseudonym and Meanings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Meaning of Pseudonym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaliyah</td>
<td>Sublime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>Gives Joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrastrlos</td>
<td>Not Inclined to Run Away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandro</td>
<td>Defending Mankind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Priceless One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Attribute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barack</td>
<td>Blessing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilia</td>
<td>Industrious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriela</td>
<td>God Is My Strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imani</td>
<td>Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inyene</td>
<td>Wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jada</td>
<td>Wise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maia</td>
<td>Great</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malik</td>
<td>King</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matías</td>
<td>Gift of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nachelle</td>
<td>Powerful Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nailah</td>
<td>Successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nando</td>
<td>Journey, Daring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedro</td>
<td>A Rock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricardo</td>
<td>Brave Power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofía</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomás</td>
<td>Twin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Victory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ziyad</td>
<td>Growth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To analyze and organize the data, I blocked off a significant number of days to read, listen to, and code interviews. I cleared all distractions so that I could wholeheartedly and without interruption hear and feel the words and emotions participants shared when they recounted their authentic college-to-career stories, starting from before college, moving through college, and ending with post-college experiences. After reading each transcript, I reread them one-by-one, coding each line-by-line, and
pairing statements with codes that emerged from the two-part interview of the college-to-career experiences and key words from the semi-structured interviews. The first draft of the codes from the interviews can be found in Appendix D.

The codes were informed by constructs of the SCCT, recognizing the influence that contextual background information has on career choices, decisions, and outcomes. I carefully and thoughtfully analyzed the codes, adjusting them as new patterns emerged. I then reviewed the pre-interview documents, including verification forms (Appendix B) and résumés submitted by participants, to enhance my understanding of the participants’ experiences and deepen my comprehension of their individual college-to-career experiences.

I then read the transcripts and organized the data into “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82) informed by the narratives, sentences, phrases, and quotes communicated in each participant’s story. I organized the clusters into four interview inquiry components (pre-college, during-college, post-college, and reflection). I used a qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 11) to assist with organizing, coding, storing, and analyzing the 1,454 minutes (24 hours) of interviews, which were transcribed by Rev.com into 543 pages of interview data. After completing each interview, I reflected on the conversation and contextualized my findings through the prism of the participants, thereby enriching the “meaning making” of the data and the corresponding “inductive understandings and processes” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 9).

In the third and fourth steps of the analyses, I drew from human capital theory and social cognitive career theories and employed deductive and inductive coding techniques to develop manageable coding categories and labels for the data. I highlighted statements,
quotes, sentences, and words “conduct[ed] multiple levels of data analysis, from the narrow codes or themes to broader interrelated themes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 54) and winnowed the narratives down to coding categories that aided in making meaning of the research questions. Through this process a cluster of themes emerged from “the textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). I reviewed the data repeatedly, refined the code categories and themes, and identified emerging patterns and meanings until arriving at the final set of codes and themes presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

In addition to the theoretical frameworks, I used empirical data and research (e.g., Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Olson, 2014, 2016; Owens et al., 2010; Parks-Yancy, 2012; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016; Storlie et al., 2015; Tate et al., 2015) to provide deeper insight into the college-to-career transition phenomenon and understand the experiences of the selected Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study. By employing the data analysis process, I was able to achieve my goal of writing a description of the research findings “so that the reader experience[d] ‘being there’” (Creswell, 2013, p. 54) and gained a deeper understanding of the college-to-career experience and the forces influencing the said experiences of the selected Black and Hispanic FGC graduates in this study.

**Role of the Researcher**

Reflecting on my own positionality, I have always been passionate about helping marginalized, underserved communities from all backgrounds realize their full potential—professionally, academically, and financially. I understand the power of financial stability and the benefits afforded by education and employment security. I also
have personal knowledge of instability, as I have watched family members, friends, and colleagues live paycheck to paycheck and have seen the stress that financial and economic insecurity placed on them.

I look back on my college-to-career experience and know that much of my success can be attributed to the confidence and faith instilled in me from my parents and family. Even though I grew up in a low-income household, I was always encouraged to believe in something greater than myself and to know that our circumstances did not define our outcomes. Higher education attainment and careers were expected of everyone in my household; as a result, my many siblings and I all attended college, most completing a bachelor’s degree or higher and all pursuing their career aspirations.

Throughout my career, I recall the employment opportunities I had and the supportive networks that facilitated my success. I know that the forces of family, education, and networks were pivotal to my career success as they fortified me with the self-efficacy, confidence, and competence to persist through education and career goal attainment, despite many setbacks along the way. I engaged in this study with the goal of gaining an empirical understanding of forces that influence the college-to-career experience of Black and Hispanic FGC college graduates and to make the acquired insight available for others seeking to make their own career journeys.

I firmly believe that the successful college-to-career transition of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates is essential to enabling historically marginalized communities to claim their share of the promise of “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.” I join Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when he proclaimed in his *I Have a Dream* speech on August 28, 1963, "We refuse to believe there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity.
of this nation.” In today’s global economy, higher education credentials are critical to accessing the “great vaults of opportunities” that have for so long evaded too many from underrepresented, diverse populations. Higher education attainment, as Becker (1975, 1994) posited in human capital theory, can facilitate socio-economic stability and mobility, including for Blacks and Hispanics. However, the benefits of higher education investments can only be fully realized when graduates, including the historically marginalized, successfully transition from college to career.

**Trustworthiness and Ethics**

I engaged in several practices to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. I first acknowledged my own positionality as a Black FGC graduate who transitioned from college to career many years before. I upheld all ethical standards in collecting, analyzing, storing, and sharing the data, safeguarding the privacy and confidentiality of the data collected. I maintained the interview data in electronic files and kept hard copy notes and drafts in a private location. To mitigate the potential for bias, I remained aware of the importance of bracketing my positionality for this study and continuously calibrated my analysis, ensuring that I remained a research instrument and not a subject in this study, focusing all attention on the college-to-career experiences as reported by the 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study.

Where information was unclear, I contacted participants (n=10) to verify my understanding or ascertain missing information (e.g., type of high school attended, number of siblings, socioeconomic status, or other incomplete or unclear information recorded during the interview). To validate my understanding of the participants college-to-career experience, I sought input from the participants about their respective bios
summarizing their college-to-career experiences. Additionally, I safeguarded the participants’ privacy and confidentiality by assigning each a pseudonym. Based on participant’s suggestions, I adjusted bios and pseudonyms where appropriate. I regularly discussed my findings and feelings with the chair of my dissertation committee, professors, classmates, scholars, professionals, and other subject matter experts.

Limitations

There are seven limitations to this study outlined. First, opposite the profile of a first-generation college students and graduates (Davis, 2010, Engle & Tinto, 2008; NCES, 2015, 2016) all participants in this study were high academic achievers (average 3.5 GPA), attained bachelor’s degrees in less than six years, attended private non-profit or public higher education institutions, attended academic rigorous high schools, or utilized college preparatory support to supplement their high school curriculum, and transitioned directly from high school to college. On the other hand, the characteristic of the FGC graduate participants in this study were like those described in the U.S. national profile of FGC students (NCES, 2015, 2016) in other ways. The participants in this study came from low-income or working-class households, except one from a middle-class family; all were racial or ethnic minorities of Black and/or Hispanic origin; had parents who had not attained a bachelor’s degree before the participants attained their undergraduate degrees; and, many were from first-generation immigrant households (NCES, 2015).

The second limitation, unlike the difficulty too many Black and Hispanic college graduates (Gaddis, 2015; Aronson, 2015) encounter transitioning from college to career, was that all participants in this study were hired directly from college into career.
professional jobs related to their college degree; only three participants took more than six months to secure their post-college position. The third limitation is that most ($n=16$) of the selected participants in this study attained undergraduate degrees in business-related majors (e.g. economics, finance, business, math, etc.). MLT, the recruitment source for this study, primarily recruit college students with business-related degrees with primarily career interests in business, and technology, the same functions as many of their employer partners. However, in recent years, MLT has begun to expand its participant and employer outreach beyond business careers.

The fourth limitation is the type of employer. The employer relationships that MLT has are mostly with large publicly traded companies operating in industries such as financial services and investment banking, personal care, mass media, management consulting, professional services, fashion apparel, and technology. Fifth, all participants had lived and/or worked in the New York or Washington DC metro areas (as those are the labor markets where most of the participants living in one of the Mid-Atlantic States resided because of the employer relationships established with MLT).

The sixth limitation is the low use and level of satisfaction with the campus-based career services unit. Participants in this study expressed varying levels of satisfaction with the services, unlike their consistent praise for the assistance they received from MLT. The career services at the various campuses lacked the consistent programming, career coaching and education, and employer connections found at MLT. As a result, the participants in this study often referenced person-specific instead of campus-specific praise and limited their use of career services to specific people, thus not realizing the full portfolio of career-related benefits available of some campuses. Finally, the seventh
limitation is that all the participants in this study were graduates of the same career and professional development program, MLT, managed by a non-profit organization focused on the career and professional development of populations like the selected participants. Although campus-based career services are also dedicated to college-to-career transition, some were reported as not being as nimble and client focused as the case for MLT (Gallup, 2016).

Methodology Summary

Drawing on human capital theory and social cognitive career theory (SCCT), this study sought to elucidate the college-to-career experiences of the 23 selected Black and Hispanic FGC bachelor’s degree recipients in this study. A two-part interview protocol was used to explore the personal experiences of the selected participants and the findings were examined, analyzed, and organized into “clusters of meaning” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82) to answer the two research questions: (1) What are the college-to-career experiences of selected Black and Hispanic FGC bachelor’s degree recipients? (2) What forces influenced the college-to-career experiences of the selected Black and Hispanic FGC bachelor’s degree recipients?

The findings from this study should improve understanding of the college-to-career transition experience of these participants. Although the goal of qualitative studies is not “generalizability” (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 191), the findings are useful in illuminating the experiences of those experiencing a said phenomenon. The findings can be used to provide contextual information when developing institutional policies, practices, and programs, provided the limited external validity of the findings is acknowledged and generalizability is avoided.
“I do know one thing about me: I don't measure myself by others’ expectations or let others define my worth” commented Sonia Sotomayor, the first Hispanic and third female Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court and a Hispanic first-generation college graduate (Totenberg, 2013, para. 4).

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews of 23 Black and Hispanic first-generation college graduates—most of whom are first-generation immigrants—who overcame significant obstacles and challenges to transition from college to career. And, like Justice Sotomayor, the selected participants in this study had to learn to not “measure [themselves] by others’ expectations or let others define [their]worth” (Totenberg, 2013).

To explore the college-to-career experiences of the selected participants in this study two research questions guided the inquiry: 1) What are the college-to-career experiences of selected Black and Hispanic FGC bachelor’s degree recipients? (2) What forces influenced the college-to-career experiences of the selected Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants?

Research Question 1: What are the college-to-career experiences of selected Black and Hispanic FGC bachelor’s degree recipients?

To answer the first research question, I examined the lived experiences of the selected participants in this study during the three stages of their college-to-career transition experience: pre-college, during college and post-college. The “essence” (Creswell, 2013, p.82) of their college-to-career experiences is described in the sections that follow.
Pre-College Experience.

Growing up, all 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study aspired to graduate from high school and later college, and eventually transition into a professional career which they believed would enable them to improve the socioeconomic conditions for themselves as well as their families and communities. They grew up believing that education would provide the economic, social, and personal benefits they vicariously learned about through books, television, movies, music, and other sources of information. Most participants reported that there an “unspoken” expectation that would their education would extend beyond high school graduation, through bachelor’s degree attainment. Inyene commented,

Even though they [her parents] didn’t have the opportunity to go to college themselves, it was something that was just unspoken. I can’t remember them explicitly, actually having a conversation saying you go to college. Somewhere, somehow, that’s how it got translated in our household.

Anticipating enrollment in college after high school, the participants in this study attended college preparatory programs at their high schools and/or leveraged college prep resources external to the school. As children of parents without a bachelor’s degree, the participants in this study understood that they would have to seek college and career guidance from sources other than their parents and their corresponding networks.

Understanding that the income that their parents earned from their blue-collar jobs would be insufficient to pay for the high cost of college, the participants in this study dedicated significant time and focus on achieving the high academic performance that they believed would position them for the scholarships, grants, and financial aid needed to pay for the bachelor’s degrees that they believed would be critical to their college-to-
career success. Imani’s remarks represented the pre-college sentiments of many of the FGC participants in this study when she said,

> Ever since ninth grade, that was a given. I think I pride myself on being the first, so I like being the first for a lot of things, so I knew. I was like, "Okay, no one's ever been to college," and I knew I didn't want to do a minimum wage position. That just wasn't my desire.

The participants in this study included 12 females and 11 males; 11 Blacks, nine Hispanics, and three Black Hispanic participants who self-identified as both Black and Hispanic. Most of the selected participants were under 30 years of age (n = 18) and nearly half were 25 years or younger (n = 11). Most FGC participants in this study were raised in low-income households (n = 15) with the remaining coming from working-class (n = 7) and middle-class (n = 1) families. Most participants grew up in two-parent households (n = 15); eight were raised in homes headed by one parent.

Unlike the FGC graduate population at large, most of the selected participants in this study are first-generation immigrants (n = 14) with at least one parent born outside the United States. All Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study (n = 9) are first-generation immigrants with at least one parent who immigrated to the United States; four of the 11 Blacks and one of the three Black Hispanics participants in this study are first-generation immigrants with at least one parent who immigrated to the United States. All first-generation immigrant graduates in this study are U.S. citizens or residents.

All participants in this study graduated from high school and college in the United States. Ten students attended a specialized high school, defined as a high school offering rigorous academic and college preparatory curriculum. The other participants attended a non-specialized public high school (n = 6), a private Catholic high school (n = 5) or a
private secular high school \((n = 2)\) and received college preparatory support from the school or an external source.

A summary of the pre-college background of the selected participants can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Pre-College: Characteristics of the 23 FGC Graduate Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Race &amp; Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>High School Type</th>
<th>Household Socio-Economic Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaliyah</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public Specialized</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrastrros</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Public Non-Specialized</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandro</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barack</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Public Specialized</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilia</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Working Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriela</td>
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<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imani</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>25</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inyene</td>
<td>Black</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Public Specialized</td>
<td>Working-Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jada</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public Non-Specialized</td>
<td>Working-Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maia</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public Specialized</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malik</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Public Specialized</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matías</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Public Specialized</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nachelle</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Public Specialized</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
</tr>
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<td>Nailah</td>
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<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public Specialized</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nando</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Public Non-Specialized</td>
<td>Low-Income</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
During-College Experience.

The selected participants transitioned from high school to college and graduated on schedule with their bachelor’s degrees. Most participants attended a non-profit, private school (n=16); the remainder (n=7) matriculated at a public university. The participants attended elite and selective higher education institutions. Eleven attended elite colleges or universities, defined in this study by their membership in the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COHFE), a non-profit organization of 35 highly selective private liberal arts colleges and universities committed to meeting the demonstrated financial needs of students admitted to their institutions. The remaining twelve participants attended selective public colleges and universities. None attended a for-profit college or university.

Most believed their high schools adequately prepared them for the academic rigor of college as expressed by Aaliyah,

So academically, I think when I look across at my peers who are also people of color, and who didn't go to a high school like I did or have a similar academic support system coming in, I think college was definitely... I think it was even harder for them, and even more defeating in many ways. But I think at least, not that I didn't have difficult experiences, but I think having gone to [My High School] before, I felt prepared to do anything, and it didn't worry me to raise my
hand in class and to be super vocal, or to go to office hours to ask for help. I think areas that many people have difficulty doing as a first-generation student, again not that I didn't have those issues, but I think it was helped by the high school I had gone to.

Abigail shared similar sentiments of college preparedness when she stated,

I feel like I was definitely much more prepared. When I got to college, [I was] like, “Oh, okay this isn't so bad.” Just because my high school was, actually, like a hard high school. There was a lot of work that was advanced. So, when I got to college, I didn't feel like I wasn't prepared, unlike some of the folks that I knew. My high school accurately prepared me for college.

Conversely, some participants did struggle to adjust to the academic demands of college, although they all were able to overcome their challenges and successfully transition from college to career. Nachelle reported,

So, questioning my intellect, I struggled more when it came to writing papers or in class discussions when other people would just talk. If they were saying something that didn't really jibe with what I read, it took me a few years to figure out that sometimes people just make stuff up or sometimes they just kind of include their own story, versus I'm very methodical and unless it's written on the page, I won't say it out loud. It took me a few years to get there. I lacked that confidence when it came to the classroom open discussions.

The social and cultural aspects of the college experience created difficulty for some of the selected participants. Aaliyah shared,

The parts that I felt I would say less prepared ... not less prepared for, but it was more difficult to navigate was the social world. I felt like socially I was trying to figure out, I remember going to sorority stuff, and I wanted to be in a black sorority or a white sorority or figuring out friend circles. I think that whole time was a lot of questioning and feeling unsure about who I was. And so, I'd say that part was a little bit more challenging for me than it was academically. But that being said, I had an amazing experience.

Most participants in this study (n=16) majored in a business-related major (e.g. business administration, accounting, economics, mathematical economics, finance).

Unsurprisingly, there is a high number of business-related undergraduate degree holders in this study because MLT’s primary focus during its formative years had been on
facilitating access to emerging business leaders, primarily in publicly-traded companies.

In recent years, MLT began to expand beyond business-related degrees, reflecting the other college majors of the remaining seven participants. All participants ($n=23$) completed at least one internship in college, preparing them with work experience to leverage in the college-to-career experience. The FGC graduate participants for this study attained their bachelor’s degrees between 2008 and 2016 and transitioned from college into a professional position related to their college degree program.

To facilitate the transition from college to career, the participants in this study reported that they realized they needed additional career development support to offset the lack of knowledge they had about searching for professional jobs in working environments very different from the blue-collar jobs of their parents. Adrastros articulated his experience when he stated,

So, going into college, I felt that other people kind of knew what they wanted to do because they had a lot more exposure to what happens in college and what happens afterwards and how do you choose a job at like a big company or going into research and do something like that.

Seeking career and professional development assistance, participants looked to other sources for the college-to-career support that they believed their parents who had not attained undergraduate degrees could not provide, thus they enrolled in MLT, a career preparation program for underserved, minority college students. Malik expressed the value he and others perceived they received from MLT’s college-to-career support,

I just remember it being such a powerful platform to engage, to connect, to learn, to grow. I really, really enjoyed my experience in MLT. I think it professionalized me in a way that was authentic or felt more authentic to me because everybody was someone of color; and I think there was also the intimacy of the one-to-one coaching, which I really appreciated. Even though we knew we were applying for the same things; and there was this competitive spirit, it still felt like family.
Matías further described the college-to-career experiences of the selected participants when he said,

I don't think I would have realized how unprepared I was for applying for these jobs or interviewing for these jobs if it was not for MLT. Through MLT, through the seminars and just talking to the other students, I realized that they were way more prepared. I realized that I needed to work harder. I realized that I needed to just network with them, learn about the resources that they were using, to really compete for these jobs. Also, the MLT coach that was assigned to me was very helpful. Before every interview, I had a mock interview with her. She helped me with my résumé and my cover letter. So, MLT was extremely, extremely helpful.

A summary of the during-college background of the participants in this study can be found in Table 3.

Table 3. During-College: Characteristics of the 23 FGC Graduate Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>College Selectivity</th>
<th>College Major</th>
<th>Internship</th>
<th>Year of College Graduation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aaliyah</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Economics &amp; Urban Studies</td>
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<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adrastros</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Mathematical Economics Analysis &amp; Psychology</td>
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<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alejandro</td>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>Public Accounting</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barack</td>
<td>Selective</td>
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<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emilia</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriela</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imani</td>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Selective</td>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Major</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<td>Economics</td>
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<td>Nailah</td>
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<td>2015</td>
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<td>Tomás</td>
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<td>Ziyad</td>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Post-College Experience.**

The participants in this study transitioned directly from college to a career in the following industries: (a) financial services, investment management, and real estate \((n = 11)\); (b) management consulting and professional services \((n = 7)\); (c) government, education, and hospital \((n = 3)\); and, (d) personal care, mass media and multisector conglomerate \((n = 2)\). Most participants \((n = 21)\) began their post-college careers within 6 months of completing their bachelor’s degree. The remaining two FGC graduate participants found employment within a year of graduation.

Although all 23 participants transitioned from college to a career related to their bachelor’s degrees, many encountered difficulties acclimating to a new, professional workplace and/or were dissatisfied with continuing their career in the industry in which they worked. Gabriela reported, an early post-college career experience that demonstrated...
the adverse impact that not having a parent who attained a bachelor’s degree can have on an emerging professional. Gabriela shared the same feelings of inadequacy expressed by other participants in this study when she stated,

> It was tough because I didn’t have parents in the industry, whereas the majority of the kids around me did. They had a parent or someone that helped get them in the door. It was a little awkward. I was a little nervous and scared to ask questions.

Even though the participants in this study transitioned from college to professional careers, they often were reminded of the impoverished households from which they came or in which members of their families, including sometimes their parents, continued to live. Ziyad expressed the financial concerns of the selected participants when he said,

> So, you have to be very cautious about the way you spend your money, because you never know what kind of situation your parents are going to be in, and if they're going to need some financial assistance. Versus other people who don't have to worry about that, even now in my current job, people can enjoy what they make, versus I always have to say in the back of my mind, ‘Hey, I gotta be conservative because you never know.’

Although most participants continued to work in the same industry in which they launched their post-college careers \( n=17 \), a notable number \( n=6 \) did switch industries, an indication of some level of dissatisfaction with the work conditions, duties, culture, or other aspect of that industry. Nearly half of the participants in this study \( n=12 \) changed jobs one or more times, some switching within the same industry \( n=6 \). Several participants in this study attributed their employment turnover to what they perceived as inadequate professional advancement, lack of support from their supervisors and colleagues and/or a feeling of not belonging or fitting into their work environment. The high turnover is a clear indication of the participants’ low level of satisfaction and engagement with their first post-college jobs as well as their continued search for an
employer and position where they feel they belong. In the case of a few participants, they expressed a desire to find a career where they felt a sense of purpose and meaning from their work.

Abigail shared, “I left there because after each performance evaluation I was basically, you know, getting the same high marks and there was no more room for growth.” An important college-to-career lesson that Nailah expressed is being aware of and managing other’s perception of you in the workplace. Nailah shared,

I definitely learned the importance of perception versus reality… I don't even think I learned … I don't think I did a good job of doing that there, which is part of the reason why I had such a difficult time there. But leaving, I was at least thinking about that towards the end. Like when I would hear feedback, I'm like this is just not true. My manager, who knew the work I did, she's like, "I know that you do a lot of work. I know that you're constantly reading research and thinking about things and that you know this, but since you're not vocal and since you don't really speak up or do things ... X, Y, Z, people don't know that."

As Pedro noted, the post-college-to-career experience of many participants in this study is filled with anxiety and the fear of “messing up.” Pedro said,

I mean there is sort of like a pressure in this position that, I mean I believe that at times I'm looked at under a microscope and have to be very, very careful, and I'm treading on very thin water just because I know that I don't have those fallback options. I don't have Uncle Joe who I can reach out to and say, "Hey. I'm looking for a job. Can you hook me up? Can you connect with someone?" For me, especially MLT has taught me is you got to be scrappy, but you also need to build a brand, and so for me, starting as a sophomore in college, that's why I knew that I couldn't make any mistakes just in terms of burning bridges. For me, that's the most important part. Just don't burn any bridges. So yes, I mean I do have to be, I feel there's a higher expectation of me. I have to be more conservative... which is not messing up and I'm not burning bridges. Due to the fact that I don't have those fallback options.

Ricardo’s post-college-to-career experience further exemplifies the feelings expressed by Pedro and others. He said,

So, a lot of the kids that are in my program, they're there because their parents work for the firm, they're financial advisors, so they're all pretty wealthy. And
they all got there because they have a connection within the firm. As opposed to me, where I had to work my way in there. I had to prove myself. I had to pretty much go through the entire interview process, network, whereas they didn't have to do that. So, I feel like, even still now, being a year and a half into the program, I still feel like I have a chip on my shoulder, and I still have to prove myself and work harder to actually prove that I still belong there.

A summary of the post-college employment experiences of the 23 FGC participants can be found in Table 4.

Table 4. *Post-College: Employment Characteristics of the 23 FGC Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>First Post-College Job</th>
<th>First Post-College Industry of Employment</th>
<th>First Post-College Job Year</th>
<th>Switched Industry Post-College</th>
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<td>Alejandro</td>
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<td>Anthony</td>
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<td>2016</td>
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</table>

Note. (1) “Switched Industry” represent participants changing jobs for a different industry. (2) “Switched Employers” refers to participants who left their first post-college job for a different employer or graduate school, even if they remained in the same industry. (3) The two shaded rows indicate participants who began their first regular (not
an internship or temporary work) post-college job more than 6 months after graduation.

Findings Summary: Research Question 1.

The FGC graduate participants in this study encountered and overcame challenges at every stage of their college-to-career transition experience, from pre-college, to during college, to post-college. They expressed pride in being a first-generation college graduate, paving the way for other family members and friends to follow. Many of the selected participants expressed strong desires to reach back and help the family members they believed facilitated their college-to-career success. Maia, expressing the same feelings of familial and community responsibility shared by other participants, said,

I was the first person in my family to go to college and graduate, but I was also the first person in my non-school peer group. I've generally been the oldest person in a lot of my social circles. So, my brother, my friends, many of them did go to college and graduate from a four-year college. Some of them didn't. I felt responsible for being an example, particularly for my brother and one of my younger cousins. But I know that kind of responsibility, or just feeling that whatever I did was tangibly impacting the people at home, that was never something that wasn't far from my mind.

Malik, sharing similar sentiments related to the college-to-career experience, stated,

It's never just about me. When I'm making decisions, I think about everybody that I've ever come in contact with me, I think about everybody that has ever invested a dollar in me or time in me. My village is huge. Absolutely when I'm making decisions, they're not just about me. Sometimes they come off as very selfish but they're about everybody that has supported and poured into me throughout my life. I think question sort of being in this role of someone that is othered, I think it's important that I'm not just doing things for me but I'm also doing things for people like my family and people like the individuals that have poured life into me in some ways or in some capacity.

Sofía’s reflection on her college-to-career experience is representative of the other FGC graduate participants in this study. She said,

I think it's just taught me to work harder, and that's something that I feel like I've experienced throughout a lot of my different experiences when it comes down to like my high school experience, my college. I had to prove myself. I always
wanted to prove myself to certain people ... Being raised in [CITY], for example, where there's so much negative media and people assume things of people who grow up there, I feel like I always had to push harder to break a lot of those stereotypes that I was hearing from other people. So, I felt like I had that in me, and so being a Latina, that's been influential in how I've sort of gone.

**Research Question 2: What forces influenced the college-to-career experiences of the selected Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants?**

Following qualitative research principles, I sought to derive meaning from the first-person experiences of the selected participants and capture the “essence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82) of how they experienced the college-to-career phenomenon. To further understanding, I constructed “textural description[s] of the experience” (p. 96) so that I could organize and link the “nonrepetitive constituents of the experience” (p. 96) into the five forces that emerged as influencing the college-to-career transition of the selected participants: persistence, family, preparation, networking, and race. Each force is discussed in further detail in the sections that follow.

**Family.**

For the participating FGC Black and Hispanic bachelor’s degree recipients, the transition from college to career was informed by various aspects of their family background. Particularly important were the following components; socioeconomic status and family hardships, first-generation immigrant status, and parental, family, and community support.

*Socioeconomic status and family hardships.* Most participants in this study come from two-parent households \((n = 15)\) and all but one described their families as low-income \((n = 15)\) or working-class \((n = 7)\). The FGC graduates’ descriptions of their family environment varied, ranging from “a pretty good upbringing” by Jada, to “I knew
what it was like to live in a community where crime was prevalent, where everybody
didn't always feel safe,” as reported by Maia. Nando viewed his family as “loving” and
“working-class.”

Family finances were a common, shared struggle voiced by participants in this
study. Describing his socioeconomic status and resourcefulness, Ricardo remarked:

In high school, my family was not that financially well-off. I had a job, and [I
was] old-school with managing my money. I had to pay for my own car, I paid for
all my expenses in terms of entertainment and all that kind of stuff.

Ricardo further explained, “Our family wasn't necessarily as well off as the
people in my school.” Barack recalled the financial difficulties of his childhood, stating,”
There were points where every semester you needed to pay about $400 a semester to pay
for the school bus to take you to school. Of course, my mother couldn't afford it.” Pedro
shared how insecurities about his financial constraints hindered his campus engagement.
He said:

I mean there are kids coming from China, from Latin America. They were paying,
I knew they were paying kind of like sticker price tuition and what not, and so for
me, the fact that I knew that other people had more money than me sort of just
didn't make it easy. It's hard to, I guess, identify students who are also low-income
and students who I can get along with because it was, I couldn't go out every
weekend. I couldn't go for restaurant meals outside of the dining hall. That having
been financially limited was, I guess, the biggest struggle.

Malik’s experience highlights the harmful impact that he believed poverty and
“low education” could have on a “loving” family. He shared:

While love was a big tenet and a core tenet of my family, there was also just a lot
of, I think, issues that emerged and surfaced because of the low education levels.
And, because at the time I didn't realize it, but, just in hindsight thinking about it,
my family was a product of poverty and so all of these different things were going
on that sort of confined them. Both my parents were victims of the crack epidemic
that hit in the 80s and so that had an effect on their ability to make decisions and
pursue education and maintain a career.
Offering a different point of view, Nando shared how he leveraged his low-income status to advance and attain his bachelor’s degree:

I was very blessed. Even though my scholarship covered everything, I was still eligible for a Pell Grant from the Federal Government because I was still considered low-income because of my family’s income. With that, I was able to supplement any additional college costs that my scholarship didn't cover. Any textbooks, a bonus conference, study abroad. Financial aid helped me out.

Many of the parents of the participants in this study had blue-collar jobs, working “super hard.” As Aaliyah shared, “My parents, they both worked super hard . . . my mother was working two or three jobs often.” Inyene, providing information about the work of her parents, reported, “My father was a taxi driver and my mom was a home health aide. That's what they did.” Jada, whose parents also had blue-collar jobs, stated, “Mom was a secretary, and my dad was a bus driver for a little while. He did a little bit of electrician work, I think. He had a variety of jobs.”

Nando disclosed, “My dad primarily worked as taxi driver. My mom was just doing odd jobs here and there, babysitting, working in the factory, stuff along those lines.” Barack expounded on the hard work he believed that his mother did and his perception of its impact on him during his youth:

I think it's very hard. For me, it was one of these situations where okay, [I] grew up poor, [I] didn't have anything . . . I'm from a low-income community…My mother was working two or three jobs often, so my interactions with her were very limited. I spent a lot of time with babysitters, and a lot of time at school, a lot of time with other family members, because she was just working constantly.

Even though most participants came from households with limited financial means, they all had at least one parent, guardian, sibling, friend or relative who directly or indirectly supported their efforts to fulfill their college and career goals. A few participants relied on the support of relatives, family friends, and/or neighbors to assist
them when their parents were unable to help due to the competing demands of work, life, or other circumstances. For example, Aaliyah learned to read from a supportive neighbor.

She shared:

They both worked long hours and all of that, and so we really relied on... our community, we very much relied on help from our neighbors, are kind of like our extended family if you will. So, one of the neighbors who was on our floor, a much older woman, she taught me how to read. I was reading by the age of three... I was with her all day, because my parents were working, they just didn't have the time.

**First-generation immigrant status.** Of the 23 FGC graduate participants, 14 had parents who immigrated to the United States. Many first-generation immigrants in this study described the challenges of negotiating between two worlds: The United States and the native land of their parents, or, for some participants, the place of their own birth. Participants discussed efforts to find the right balance between respecting the traditions of their parents’ culture and embracing the expectations of the place that they now call home, the United States. Nando reported struggles of navigating an unfamiliar land, stating:

I feel like my story is just very, very typical of that of any son of immigrants in New York City. My parents struggled a lot trying to navigate the communities here. Trying to learn English while still trying to figure out how society worked, in terms of what kind of work they should find, just because they didn't have a college education.

Nando described how he often struggled to find a place in the workplace where he felt he could be his authentic self and fit in. Because he found it difficult to reach outside of his familiar circle of friends and family to develop relationships, he frequently elected to stay comfortable in the company of people with similar backgrounds. Nando, shared:

As a first generation, even college grad, right? Just individual. I do feel like it makes me feel... One, I try to seek out other individuals like me. If, by looking at my own friend group in college, my closest friends had similar backgrounds to
myself. They were also first gen college graduates, they were the sons of immigrants. Very, very few friends of mine were of the opposite race. Maybe acquaintances, or what have you, but I really connected with those who had similar experiences to me. I find myself, with people who were not from that experience, I have to . . . I don't know how to word this, but I feel like I can't be myself completely, right? It even goes into where I am now in the work place. I can't be my authentic self. I feel like there's a . . . culturally it's very different. I feel like it's a combination of my background, even socioeconomically, too. Where I grew up versus someone who had grown up in a suburb or who's fifth generation in an affluent neighborhood. The way they speak, the things they do in their spare time, the activity copies all that stuff, it's very different.

Sofía, the daughter of a first-generation immigrant parent, described her experience growing up as a first-generation immigrant:

My family is from the [Central America]. I grew up in a two-parent household, so my parents have been married throughout my childhood and even as an adult. Both my parents came from the [Central America] so all of us, me, and my siblings, were born here in the United States.

Many of the FG immigrants in this study found themselves caught in a cultural push and pull with their families in pursuit of their academic and career goals. For these students, cultural differences seemed to exacerbate stresses within the process of transitioning from college to career. For example, Nachelle had to convince her parents to allow her to attend a college distant from her hometown. She remarked that, in her native culture, women were discouraged from pursuing higher education credentials. Instead, women were expected to become mothers and wives and focus primarily on the needs of the family. However, after much persistence and self-determination, Nachelle garnered support from her school administrators to apply to colleges and received her parents blessing to attend the distant elite college to which she was accepted with a full scholarship. She explained:

So, I don't think they (parents) really understood. It just didn't make sense to them. To them, I was just going to grow up and get married and have kids, and I was going to get a job. And I was smart, and they thought I would be successful at
whatever I did, but I don't think they really understood the American system, which is like, no, you need a college degree, and the school that you go to matters. For them, the fact that I would be leaving home was the hardest part... So, I wanted to go to the best school that I was able to get... college wasn't really a thing that my parents talked to me about. They didn't care for it or understand the value of it... So, it was because of one of my AP teachers and our guidance counselor that I considered going to college. So, then I applied... I got accepted.

Many FG immigrants in this study expressed guilt about the sacrifices that their parents made on their behalf and regretted that they were unable to do more for their parents. Ziyad, expressing gratitude for immigrating to the United States and guilt for the sacrifices his parents made, shared that his family expected him to take “advantage of every opportunity in the course of education” so that he could have a better life in this “land of opportunity.” He stated:

Okay, well, I was born in [Africa]. I lived there until I was about eight years old. My family kind of won like a visa lottery, and we moved to the U.S. when I was eight in 2002... America, especially back home, is known as the land of opportunity... I think they [his parents] wanted to come here more so just for opportunities. To give us opportunities, which we're trying to take as full advantage of it as possible.

Ziyad shared that a primary motivator for his career pursuit and choices was having the financial means to retire his parents whom he described as sacrificing so much, including immigrating to the United States, to provide a better life for he and his siblings. He shared, “Coming from an immigrant household, everyone is always thinking about retiring. My biggest goal right now is to retire my parents.”

**Parental, family, and community support.** Many of the FGC graduates received support and encouragement from parents, family, and community. Sometimes, the support was in the form of inspiring words, other times it was the tutorial guidance of a neighbor or the hard work of parents. A combination of this supportive network, FGC graduates reported, contributed to their college and career accomplishments. Malik
shared, “I would say my mom was the one that really pushed for me to have access to the best education.”

Nailah, echoing the sentiments of many of the first-generation immigrant participants in this study, shared the burden of the sacrifice that her parents made and how it motives her to succeed.

I mean immigrating to the United States, they made a lot of sacrifices and the rhetoric in my house has just always been that they made those sacrifices for me, so I could have the best education and the best experiences that I wouldn't have had back home in Africa. So, it just felt kind of like a prize in a way for all the sacrifices that they had made.

Persistence.

Most participants in this study experienced a disproportionate level of personal and family hardships. Notwithstanding, they chose to persist beyond their circumstances to realize their goals of bachelor’s degree attainment and college-to-career transition. Time and again, participants in this study discussed how persistence mattered in the college-to-career transition experience and how they gained strength from their many struggles to overcome obstacles. Abigail responded to a question about the most important forces influencing her career success stated, “Being persistent, yes. Being persistent has definitely helped me.” Two dimensions of persistence emerged from the experiences of the FGC graduate’s in this study: self-confidence and overcoming challenges.

Self-confidence. Most of the FGC graduate participants in this study demonstrated a high level of confidence in their ability to succeed in academics and career. They also articulated willingness to seek out needed resources to close the knowledge and experience gaps that they uncovered. Although some were reluctant to
reveal their knowledge gaps, most were intellectually curious and embraced learning and discovering new knowledge that would prepare them for success. Abigail attributed much of her academic and career success to the confidence that her parents instilled in her which undergirded her persistence. She shared:

Confidence comes from, I think it stems from childhood too. I don't remember, like, ever hearing anything negative from my family, any, like, disrespecting my intellect or my capabilities. They've always, my parents, that's one thing I can say for a fact growing up my parents always like, you can do anything you want to do, you can do it. You know? They always said that. And they never had any doubts in whatever I wanted to. They always kind of supported it. So, I think my confidence stems from childhood. And even just growing and being in school and hearing other either professors, teachers, other students say, “Oh, you know you're smart. You can do it.” Like a lot of positive reinforcement so that helps with confidence. I really think for me having that strong family connection you know definitely helped . . . and I also have, you know, family who always encouraged reading. So, that's another thing to that could have played a factor.

Nailah asserted that parental guidance played a critical role in her self-confidence and enabled her to look beyond her circumstances to see opportunities when others might see unsurmountable barriers. She commented:

Even though my parents weren't . . . like I didn't have that familiar experience . . . my parents always did instill confidence in me that I was just as smart as everyone else and that I could do anything that I put my mind too. And they always supported me . . . I felt confident in myself to [do] well, you know, I may not have that or know it, but I can learn that. Right? I think it also comes from the fact that I was first generation, so I couldn't just seek out what I had grown up with or what my parents had told me.

Nando also believed that the support from family and friends was essential to his success, especially considering his struggles with self-doubt. He described how meaningful the emotional support he received from his friends and family was to him:

That's just so key because in the darkest of times, without anyone to lean on it can be a very dark place to be in. Me, having all the struggles I did, I was able to get through it because of the friends I had around me . . . friends I had made at the internship the year before, even friends back home, the support of my mom and my sister. That is so key and to have someone…In general, that translates to all of
my success. I just never saw a lot of potential in myself, but it was other people who saw potential in me that helped push me to start seeing what they saw and then subsequently putting that and translating that into actual effort. Getting better education, seeking better resources, finding better jobs and internships, stuff like that.

In the case of Ziyad, he shared that he initially felt successful when he first transitioned from college to his career. He stated, “I felt like I had made it. I’m on Wall Street.” But, he later said, “It was short lived,” referring to the euphoria that accompanied his first year on the job. Two years into the position, Ziyad’s confidence in his ability waned. He stated, “My problem is that I used to be good at that. Now I’m just going with the flow, and that’s not helping.” He is currently evaluating whether he wants to remain in his job or switch careers.

**Overcoming challenges.** Many FGC graduates in this study endured significant obstacles on the path to attaining their bachelor’s degrees, transitioning to jobs after college, and launching the careers that many had dreamed of since childhood. For many participants in this study, the desire for a “better life” motivated them to push through obstacles and overcome challenges. Many participants communicated how they viewed their obstacles as a set up for success instead of a setback, maintaining a positive, determined attitude during adversities. Barack recalled a clarion moment when he realized there was a different life for him to pursue. This story epitomizes the drive behind many of the FGC graduates in this study. Barack shared:

I think for me, growing up in a gang environment, it was one of these things where a lot of my closest friends were gang members, and I saw a lot of them either in a gang, in jail, or just not really doing anything in life. For me, I contrasted that with the kids I saw on TV, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *The Cosby Show* and things like that. I'm like, “Hmm, this is dynamic, and this is different.” I just realized that there's this different dynamic. Everybody on TV is living one type of life. Everybody in the community, we're living another type of life. We're eating the same thing every day; not because that's what we want, but
we're eating it every day because it's all we can afford. There's more to it than what I see around…I began to realize that there's another lifestyle here.

Malik also described how he tried to learn from difficult experiences and use the knowledge gained to fuel his ambitions. Malik shared:

I think it's my ability to take into account all of the different experiences that I've accumulated and use them in productive and generative ways. How am I taking the pain that comes with my parent being a drug addict and channeling that into something that's not unproductive but actually productive?

Tomás, rebounding from a devastating career set-back where he failed to qualify for his dream job after completing all pre-employment tests except the final one, communicated how he persisted to get back on his feet, move forward, and help others by fulfilling a commitment he made to himself to use his personal and career resources to help develop the community in which he grew up. He shared:

I still found a way to pick myself up to where I am today, and I'm close to making six figures in the next 12 months. But going back to the story, when you want whatever you want as bad as you needed to breathe underneath water, then you'll be successful. . .So I picked myself up really from those things, and obviously I'm still living a few blocks away from where I grew up, and I did that deliberately because right now I can afford to live in the city, where I work but I'm staying up here because I want to keep seeing my people. I don't want to lose my real DNA, and the reason why I've got to keep pushing forward. Because at the end of the day, I was born in the United States, and I have citizenship, and I'm a guy, there's more privilege there. But people from our community don't get to see their kids grow up to be successful.

Alejandro also describes a difficult lesson learned. Alejandro shared:

I applied to both [School A and B] as well as other schools, however, and I haven't told many people, however, when I was receiving acceptance letters, [School B] sent me an acceptance letter with a package giving certain financial aid requirements that I met, given my parents' low income. . .With [School A], even though the tuition was less, I never received, at least I thought I had never received an acceptance letter, so when I was 17 years old…I never thought to call them and say, "Hey I haven't received anything, am I in or out?" I just kind of accepted whatever was given to me . . . I was under the impression that they never sent me a letter. They did, I was just never given that letter. It was a full tuition, it was full ride, I was not gonna have to pay a dime to go to [College A]. I actually
received the letter after I graduated from College B, two years later...we were cleaning out the house, my mother finds this letter and says, "Oh, this is for you." I'm like, "College A, what do they want from me? They never even accepted me." I opened the letter, it's dated 2008, and stating, "Congratulations, you have a full ride."

Emerging from deep thought, Alejandro described how this experience taught him to be more pro-active. He asserted:

I was very passive through that entire process. . . . I should have made more of an effort. I was very passive then. I'm a lot more active now and that's certainly one of the things I've learned; that in order to get what you want, you need to be more active and try to go out there and try to obtain whatever it is that you're looking for, instead of being passive and waiting for things to come for you.

Because Alejandro lacked knowledge about the college application process and did not realize that he could inquire about his application status, he lost an opportunity to attend a college with a full scholarship. As Alejandro reflected on the lessons learned from past experiences, he realized that he had overcome his passive tendency, and I suspect increased his confidence, to become a more assertive person willing to ask questions he dared not ask many years before.

**Preparation.**

For every FGC graduate participant, college and career preparation emerged as important dimensions of the preparation force that influenced the college-to-career transition experience.

**College preparation.** Of the 23 participants in this study, 17 attended a high school focused on preparing students for college. Whether they attended a specialized high school \((n = 10)\), private high school \((n = 2)\), or Catholic high school \((n = 5)\), the students understood the value of college preparatory programs. Participants in this study believed that they would not have had access to the elite and selective colleges that they
attended, or the competitive scholarships and college funding they received, had they not attended college preparatory high schools. These then-high achieving students saw bachelor’s degree attainment as essential to accomplishing their career goals and improving the socioeconomic status of themselves and their families and achieving a “better life.” College preparation had two primary components: college preparatory programs and resources, and college scholarship and financial awards.

**College preparatory programs and resources.** Many participants in this study “beat the odds” (Levine and Nidiffer, 1996), gaining college admission to non-profit and public higher education institutions and attaining bachelor’s degrees in under five years. Many FGC graduates described how they began preparing at a young age to position themselves for admission to a college preparatory school that would lead to the bachelor’s degree attainment they believed to be critical to their college-to-career transition. Aaliyah described the arduous process she went through to gain admission to a college preparatory high school; attending this high school then positioned her for admission to an elite university:

And despite the diversity in [the] public schools, because these three schools all had the same entrance exam, that their diversity was not reflective of the actual city. And, so [the] public schools started this program, which starts during the school year of seventh grade. It goes all summer between seventh and eighth grade, and then it goes halfway through eighth grade, basically. And the whole essence of the program is to prepare you for this city exam, to help get you into one of these three schools. And the program was only open to students of color. And, so your high school had to recommend you, and then you're a part of this program and you did this for basically a year and a half straight. And, so for a year and a half, during my seventh-grade and eighth-grade year, I went to school on Wednesday night after my regular school, so I think it was like four to seven p.m. or something like that, and then all-day Saturday. And then in the summer you were there every day all day.

Maia also recounted the time and effort she invested in her K12 academic preparation:
So, I remember I tested into the talented and gifted program. So, this was all within the placement of the county public school system . . . and then one of my future mentors throughout my high school career . . . really pushed me. In addition to that, I took a handful of AP classes as well.

Some students spoke of the encouragement that they received for academic achievement from mentors and teachers. For instance, Anthony recalled, “I went to public schools. The teachers thought that I should have a little more challenge, so they put me in a Catholic school.”

On the other hand, one student, during his junior year of high school, realized that he was inadequately prepared for the academic rigor of college. Matías recalled,

My brother went to a school that really, prepared students for college, so he was able to take AP classes. My school did not provide AP classes. When I was studying for the SATs, I just realized that most of the things that I was studying, that was my first time seeing it. Those two things made me realize that my high school was not a good high school, to be honest, when it comes to admission into college . . . I don't think it really does a good job of preparing students.

Notwithstanding, Matías later found the academic support he needed to graduate from high school and enroll in a public university where he received a full scholarship. Matías, determined to attend college and attain a bachelor’s degree so that he could pursue his career aspirations, shared the strategy he employed to gain missing academic knowledge. He said, “I had to visit a tutor a lot on campus. My grades were around B, B-, C+, but I definitely needed to seek extra help to do well in those courses.” Moreover, he shared, “I just didn't see any other option, to be honest...I never saw it as something I was going to give up.”

All students in this study attended elite \( n = 12 \) or selective \( n = 11 \) colleges and universities and graduated on a regular academic schedule, completing their bachelor’s degrees in accordance with their academic program plans. Most participants graduated
within four years unless they were enrolled in a dual degree program or took an additional semester to finish normal coursework.

**College scholarship and financial awards.** Rigorous college preparation in high school coupled with low family income enabled most participants to receive generous financial aid and merit scholarship awards. In some cases, participants also took out student loans to cover the unmet cost of college. The participants reported that their financial aid (need-based, merit-based, and student loans) made their college attendance possible. Many stated that had they not had financial assistance to cover the cost of attendance, they would not have been able to attend college and attain their bachelor’s degrees. Others reported that the financial aid awards created higher education options that they would not have otherwise had.

Even though most participants received financial aid, the package rarely funded the full cost of attendance, requiring many FGC participants in this study to borrow student loans and incur significant debt to cover unmet financial need. Some students expressed concern about the high student loan debt incurred during college and the long length of time it may take to pay off the loan balances. Most students reported that the amount of financial aid awarded did not adversely impact their college or career decisions. For these students, they received enough scholarships, grants, and other non-loan financial aid that they borrowed little to no student loans. Anthony shared, “I went on a full ride, thankfully.” Emilia stated, “I have no student loans.” Tomás shared, “[University] gave me a pretty decent financial aid package but the scholarships plus the fact that I also got into the honors for my university. Between my internships, side jobs
and financial aid, I ended up graduating college debt-free.” Matías stated, “I graduated without debt.” And, Pedro reported:

I was blessed with a [Organization] scholarship. [Organization] is a nonprofit organization that matches low-income students with very good institutions…I eventually received full-ride scholarship based on, it was income based and also had some merit-based scholarship to complete the rest.

Inyene shared, “I had a subsidized loan. All my loans were subsidized, actually…Thank god, I didn't graduate with a whole lot of debt. Definitely, the scholarships helped…The scholarship money is definitely what made it possible to attend [University].” Abigail, responding to the question, “Did the amount of loans that you owed influence in any way your career decision, or your job decision?” stated, that although she had a $25,000 student loan debt, “No, it didn't no. It didn't impact my career or job decision.”

Most students who borrowed stated that their need to borrow adversely impacted their college-to-career transition choices and decisions. Instead of looking for a job aligned with their career passion, some reported, they chose jobs based on the highest compensation. Jada who had $24,000 in student loans, stated affirmatively, “Yes,” when asked whether student loan debt influenced her college-to-career decision.

Ricardo, who graduated with a bachelor’s degree from a public university, reported, “I came out of college with about $130,000 loans.” He further stated that the debt load influenced his career decision, stating, “Yeah, it definitely did. That's partially why I'm in finance.” Also, when asked about consideration for graduate school, Ricardo shared, “I've thought about it. But one of the biggest points is I still have $110,000 of debt. And going back to school, and putting on another $100, probably $200,000 in debt doesn't really seem like the best idea for me.”
Sofía stated that her $60,000 student loan debt initially influenced her college-to-career decision. She stated,

It did in the beginning, and, [with] regards to what some of my career aspirations were...So, I graduated in 2008. That was the time when the market wasn't good, and there were a lot of layoffs at major companies and everything. So, it was difficult ... It was challenging finding work that paid well unless I went down the investment banking or consulting route, which I knew I didn't want to do.

**Career preparation.** Career preparation is another component of the preparation force that also influenced the college-to-career experiences of the FGC participants in this study. Three elements of career preparation that emerged were career preparation and job search support, one-on-one career coaching, and employer connections. All FGC graduates in this study participated in the MLT career preparatory program, a program that includes career-related services.

MLT’s five-part structured career preparation program offers (MLT, n.d.): (1) One-on-one coaching that culminates in a “personalized career roadmap that ties long-term career aspiration to near-term goals and development objectives”; (2) Personal clarity to “gain insight into your strengths, passions, and development areas” aligned with career goals; (3) Job search guidance and support to “develop the skills and relationships” needed to be successful in the job search and recruiting process; (4) A high-leverage professional network that connects participants to “a community of peers with similar goals and more than 6,000 MLT alumni, corporate partners, and other executives”; (5) exposure and access to top employers (e.g., Fortune 500 companies, Best Employer companies, and other highly desired employers), providing “unique access to the best hiring organizations . . . seeking MLT” members for internships and regular, full-time positions. The intentionally structured career preparation program seeks to provide
participants with education, coaching and connections that facilitate job placement.

**Career preparation and job search support.** All FGC graduate participants praised their experience with the MLT career development program and believed the career preparation and job search support greatly influenced their college-to-career outcomes. Participants perceived benefits to their college-to-career transition experience of customized career education, exploration, preparation, coaching, networking, relationships, and job search support, as well as the connections to employers, peers, and alums. Emilia, like most of the FGC graduate participants, described her MLT experience as transformative, having a “life changing” impact. Highly satisfied with the MLT program, she asserted, “My experience with MLT was life changing. I think you probably hear that a lot from MLT people. Yeah just, looking back I don't think I would have gotten an investment banking internship if I hadn't done MLT.”

Imani, described components of the MLT career preparation process that she believed prepared her to transition from college-to-career, stated,

So, you apply [to MLT] in your sophomore year, and it [the program] doesn't begin formally until junior year. So, every month you have monthly assignments and the goal is to prepare you for your career. So, internship, full-time job. And then you have a coach that kind of probes you and helps you kind of understand: What exactly are your interests? And, what career path will make the most sense for you? So that was great. And then you also have conferences, every quarter, where you get together with all 200 something of the other fellows, and just, like, it's great, because you get to see everyone and then you also have assignments you do, and it's very fun. But after the program ends formally, which is the summer before your senior year, you have your job interview and then from there, hopefully you get your full-time offer.

All FGC graduate participants in this study believed that MLT’s structured, 18-month career preparation program directly or indirectly facilitated their college-to-career transition and was a major force in securing a job after graduation and beyond. When I
asked participants if there were specific resources, information, or people that were
particularly useful in their career search, many gave a response consistent with that
offered by Nando: “I would say MLT. That was the biggest one. Honestly, just calling
my coach and having different resources would be my number one.” Matías asserted, “So
without MLT, I don't think I would have been able to be in front of [Company].”

Gabriela, expressing sentiments like other FGC graduate participants in this study,
spoke of the career knowledge and professional confidence gained from the MLT
program. She, like other FGC participants in this study, appreciated learning about
professional “softer skills” that may not be known or obvious to a first-generation college
graduate who was raised by parents working blue-collar jobs without the professional
experience to transfer that knowledge to the FGC graduates. Gabriela shared:

I owe so much to MLT. Just the confidence and learning how to present yourself
and be able to feel like you're not at a disadvantage. It just was amazing to be in a
network with so many people going through the same process…We had a lot of
prep before we started the internship. It was more of the softer skills like make
sure you're at work every day before your boss gets there and you're there after
your boss leaves every day. Small things like if you're going to meet a client,
make sure you have a suit. It was a lot of the soft skills on how to be professional.
It really helped me because I had no idea.

In addition to career preparation and job search skills, FGC participants reported
that the MLT program equipped them with critical life skills such as managing finances
and navigating careers after graduation, new information that could be essential to first-
generation college graduates who did not have parents to share that knowledge and
experience. Adrastros expressed:

MLT teaches you a lot of things, and one thing that I guess career services doesn't
would be how to manage career transitions afterwards and how to figure out what
happens in between. And how to do a lot of that scrappy networking that they call
it. So, it'll teach you to save for X amount of months of rent or cost of living to
make sure that if you go through something like the bumps along, like your
career, if you go through one of those bumps, make sure that you're prepared for it.

Participants also perceived benefits from attending the conferences MLT held. Participants reported that these conferences connected them to employers seeking to hire MLT fellows and provided on-site career education and professional development training as well as networking with peers, employers, and alums. In one representative comment, Anthony, highlighted the benefits of having time to connect and network with peers, stating:

The most amazing thing that I got from MLT was going to conferences and hearing people who talk about their experiences and what they're doing. Phenomenal. All very high-achieving people that look like me, which I've never been around and never really experienced.

In addition to the MLT career preparation program, some participants also used the career services programs at the four-year colleges and universities that they were attending. While some participants mentioned campus-based career services as an important resource, participants tended to describe these services as supplementing, not replacing the MLT resources.

Aaliyah perceived that on-campus career services were limited, stating: “I think career services is great, but that being said, I think they sort of open the door but it's really, to go from interview to offer it's really about your peers.” Adrastos, contrasting the campus-based career services with the MLT program, asserted that the university career services were not as value-added as MLT. In part, according to Adrastos, the campus-based career services failed to hold students accountable for not actively engaging in the development of knowledge, skills, and abilities to attain their desired
career outcomes. He perceived a lack of urgency and engagement by the campus-based career services unit. Adrastros asserted:

Career services is more learning in your spare time, not so much in your face. You, kind of, in between all of the craziness that goes on at the college, you go to them. They try to go to you as much as they can, but there was no urgency. Like if I have to break this appointment, they understand. MLT will not so much understand. They will hold you accountable to a T.

Victoria identified some of the shortfalls from career services when she reported:

It [career services] was very transactional, which is the opposite of MLT, right? So, it was like you go in and then you have a goal and you ask questions and you get answers, and then you know, you can decide like do you want to go back again or not. But it was a very general information, whereas like with MLT there was a follow-up, there were assignments every month, you had a coach, it felt more personalized.

Offering more praise than other participants, Anthony recalled the value he perceived of the career advice and resources he received from campus-based career services representatives. Anthony stated:

I was also very close with people at the career center, so I went to the career center at least once or twice a week to help prepare for stuff. I think I had a lot of support and I had a lot of forethought going into the interview process and the application process.

One-on-one career coaching. Participants perceived benefits to their college-to-career transition of the career coaching provided by MLT. Pedro emphasized MLT’s career coaching support as influencing his college-to-career transition experience, stating, “MLT for me, the biggest component of it is the coaching, the coaches and the cohort.” Nando described how his career coach was able to guide him through career exploration and help him expand his career options, an exercise that enabled him to land five job offers upon graduation. Nando reported:

I was pretty much set on education, nonprofit, that's what I was gonna do. I remember telling my [MLT] coach, "You know what? I feel like I don't belong in
this program as much just because everyone's very business focused, and finance focused, and I'm nonprofit." She really challenged me, she was like, "I've met a lot of people like you who are very, very ambitious and altruistic and feel like nonprofit's the way to go. I'm not gonna knock you for that, but I just wanna say, open your mind. There's many different opportunities and I would hate to see you not take advantage of the program to the fullest extent.” . . . I had five offers in total.

*Employer connections.* Nearly all participants \((n=21)\) in this study transitioned directly from college to a full-time job within the six months after graduating. However, both participants who had protracted job searches were employed in regular positions within a year after graduation. All participants, to at least some extent, attributed their career transition success to the MLT program. Participants also described other resources (e.g., campus-based career services, personal contacts) and other job search activities (e.g., cold-calling, internet searches) as important to their college-to-career transition.

Every FGC graduate participant in this study completed at least one, and in most cases multiple, internships or other career preparatory work engagements (e.g., internship, non-college-based employment, work study, volunteer work, class research projects, job shadowing, community service) before graduating from college. In some cases, participants identified their work engagements through the MLT network and in other cases participants secured them on their own, using campus-based career services, or other resources.

Malik reported, “I interviewed with a couple of people and ended up getting a job with [Company]. That was the job I got offered through MLT. They were offering me a lot of money.” Abigail, like other FGC graduate participants, described the perceived importance of working in internships before launching the final phase of the college-to-career, identifying a job, and beginning a post-college career. Some participants
leveraged the career preparatory education and career development training to research and find internships and full-time jobs outside of the MLT network. Abigail obtained her internship after applying directly to a vacancy posted on the employer’s job board. She explained:

I had an internship during summer, those ones were like literally I just searched like on my own…And then for my senior year of college, I had an internship with the federal government, and that I got on my own too. Like I went on USA Jobs, “Hey, I applied, and lo and behold, I got a call,” and that's how I got the internship.

Barack praised the career development support he received from MLT, but shared that he obtained his three internships without the direct involvement of MLT:

None of my internships, none of my three internships in college, were sourced through MLT. They were through, let's see, they were through personal connections, previous personal development programs, or through me just taking off and just putting myself out there and getting these opportunities. That was that, but I did…[gain]significantly from a professional development standpoint.

Alejandro also perceived the value of internships and shared how he leveraged his job searching skills to secure an internship:

The internships with [Company] were a combination of the recruiters knowing who I was already and me actually applying through career services because once I applied to career services and they were reviewing my résumé and my application, they knew who I was. And they said, you know, “Let's take him. He has the GPA requirement. He has things on his résumé, extracurricular activities, good grades, prior work experience. This is a candidate who seems well-rounded, and we know who he is. Let's bring him in.”

Networking.

Participants in this study also perceived the benefits of networking and reported that networking greatly influenced their college-to-career transitions. Many of the FGC graduate participants had to learn how to network. Through MLT’s professional development training, participants learned the value of developing relationships and
contacts that they could leverage for employment opportunities, information, and resources not always available to those outside of a network. Making networks work is an important aspect of networking that will be discussed in this section. Tomás described his lack of knowledge about networking and implied the need for FGC graduates to receive training on networking. He said, “I'll say this flat out, I don't think I grew up with the right information. I don't think a lot of people that come from my neighborhood grew up with the best information to make the best decisions.”

Making networks work. The MLT career preparation program enabled participants to shift from viewing networking as a burden to seeing it as an asset, with career-enhancing capability. Participants reported that they came to appreciate networking as a mutually beneficial activity with reciprocal rewards. Isabella shared how MLT facilitated her understanding of the benefits of networking,

Every single MLT event had some networking component in there, and we were expected to network with our peers, network with partner organizations, and meet with folks from there. I was very, very shy as a youngster, and I still consider myself to be an introvert now. Eventually, I began to see how those who networked well, they tended to obviously get the job. They had the friends. All these positive social things come out of folks who know how to network well. I just forced myself to go to networking events, obviously polish the way I move about conversations. I became less fearful of what people think of me, and just throw into it, try to have fun to, and seeing it less as a chore. I think over the years, now people tell me that I'm the networking person, and I always like to go to all these networking events. Before MLT, I definitely would not have wanted to go to any sort of networking event.

Peer networking may be especially useful for FGC graduates. Adrastros expressed the stress that he felt from being a FGC graduate, noting, “In a lot of ways, as a first-gen, I do feel like I have a little bit more pressure to feel like I know what I'm doing and to feel like I'm figuring things out.” At the same time, he, like other FGC graduates, took
comfort in and gained strength from connecting with supportive communities of FGC students and graduates who had shared experiences. Adrastros asserted:

But I think that being first generation does kind of put a little bit of that into your head, from the people that I know who are first-gen, you have to pave a path. But at the same time, somebody's gone through that path before you. You don't have to feel like you're going through it alone. I have peers that are going through the same things. We talk about it, and I think that's what MLT does, it connects you with people if you don't already have that. And it makes you feel like you're not going through it alone, and if you talk to somebody who's older, I think it shows you something in front of you that you don't already see.

Ricardo, realizing the value of networking after graduating from college, lamented:

I think people, especially when you're a freshman or a sophomore in college, people always try to tell you, whenever you go to these speaker events, they all try and tell you how important it is to build your network, make connections, and all that kind of stuff. But I don't think you really understand how important that really is until you actually start looking for a job and you make that connection. And that connection ends up coming out and helping you. I think that's really when you start to appreciate it. And at that point, for me it was too late. I think if I had the opportunity to make that connection, or to understand that, I think I would have been better off.

Some FGC graduates described how they proactively searched for information to learn about career options before they learned how to network. Nailah, not deterred by the lack of access to a professional network because of not having “family, friends, or relatives who [she] could lean on,” researched profiles of accomplished professionals to fill in knowledge gaps. She reported:

My parents hadn't gone to college, and we didn't have friends or any of that…Well, they didn't have, we didn't have family friends or relatives who I could really lean on for that, so I read a lot of books, a lot of research online. So, I was always seeking out information from whether it was online or people who I could speak to. I think I was just doing it for that because I just wanted to know, and I've always wanted to be as prepared as possible for any situation I put myself into.

Matías, also, seeking to learn about career options, shared:
I think a lot of it has to do with just some of the people that I was looking up to, and I was interested in just learning more about their biographies and their profile. They all went to college, so . . . the last year of college I was really interested in finance, I started reading about Warren Buffett and other people that are famous in finance. I just realized that everyone went to college, so I thought it would be the next step for me.

Imani reported that she came to realize that networks can be beneficial with career advancement. She stated, “I need this network to be able to get to the next level . . . [and to] solve this problem.” Anthony found one of his internships by using his network, stating:

I found out from a friend who wasn't even interested in finance. She was just like, “Oh, you're interested in finance. You should apply to this place called [Company]. My godfather works there.” And then I looked up . . . I knew what [Company] was, I just didn't know they had an internship program. I looked it up, saw that they had it, I spoke to the guy she recommended me to. He liked me. I think he put the note out to HR and stuff. And then I went through the application process and got it.

MLT’s career preparation and professional development training enabled Sofía and Ricardo to understand the value of networks. Sofía stated,

So, all of those networks and relationships that I’ve built have been huge in my success. Because if you look through my résumé, a lot of those jobs that I’ve landed have been through some sort of contact . . . as long as I remember, that’s something that I’ve always done is like seeking people who can help me and really learning from them, and then having them really shape what I do next, whether it’s academically or career-wise.

Ricardo shared,

I think also the network was also really helpful. So, whether it was the networking with my own peers through clubs or organizations, or just making connections with professionals through MLT . . . just understanding that you have to network once you start work I think it's crucial. Just because you have a job, and you're at a successful company, doesn't mean you're gonna get everything handed to you. And you still have to get to know and reach out to people and make those connections to keep on being more successful.
Race.

As Black and Hispanic first-generation college graduates from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, it is unsurprising that at times race mattered impacted the college-to-career experiences of the selected participants. Many FGC graduate participants in this study described how racial discrimination and bias on college campuses and in workplaces were forces that influenced their college-to-career experiences. Some participants encountered racially charged incidents during their internships and declined offers because of the experience. Others were told by peers about experiences of bias or discrimination and opted out of a working for those employers. Racial encounters caused one participant to resign from a job and adversely impacted the productivity and job performance of others. Discrimination, bias, and microaggression are additional aspects of race that will be discussed in this section.

Most of the FGC graduate participants in this study acclimated well to their college campuses but, for many, it took some time to adjust. Some purposely sought out college campuses that would expose them to people different from the race of the community in which they were raised, recognizing the need to learn how to communicate with people of diverse backgrounds. Barack selected his college with the intention of meeting people from different walks of life but, at the same time, having a community of people from the same race and background with whom he could engage and relate. Barack shared:

With 30,000 people, 30,000 undergrads, that makes 6,000 black people on campus, so I felt like I had my black base, which is what I was comfortable, but then I also was able to interact with predominantly white people in addition to people from all over the world, just different cultures. [University] just provided that platform that I needed.
Emilia and Imani described how that connections with affinity groups enabled them to feel more comfortable on the campus and access resources that supported their college-to-career experience. Emilia shared:

My sophomore year [I] found Chicano caucus actually through a girl who . . . was also Mexican and she was, like, you should come to the Chicano caucus and that was completely mind boggling to me to see so many Chicano students at [University] and who have similar interests to me because my whole educational experience before that had been, I was always the person of color, so I was just like whoa.

Imani noted her determination to persist, and the positive role the Black Student Association played during her college years:

I had made myself a promise, like, no matter how hard it is, I will graduate from [University] in four years. So that was my plan. I was like, "I will graduate." So once the first two or three weeks of school passed and I saw how horrible I was doing, in this class in particular, I knew I had to do something, so I heard people say, "Go to office hours," and there were also some upperclassmen who I met through the BSA, the Black Student Association, and they would tell you, "Go to office hours, get to know your professors," and that kind of helped me.

**Discrimination, bias, and micro-aggression.** Most Black and Hispanic FGCs participants in this study reported experiencing race and/or gender bias, discrimination, and/or microaggressions during their college to career transition. Some FGC graduate participants also described intra-racial dynamics, including colorism. Several participants believed their careers were derailed by the racism and bias they encountered at the companies they worked after transitioning from college to career. Gabriela expressed dismay with the work culture at her company:

It’s not the job. It’s corporate America in general to be really honest. The hurdles that we, as people of color, have to jump through and the amount that we have to prove ourselves more than other counterparts around the firm, it’s a bit frustrating. It’s a bit demeaning. There’s no such thing as work-life balance in this industry. If you're not game to put in those hours, then you won’t survive. It’s a bit frustrating because I think that I lost myself in the process of meeting that.
Maia expressed disappointment in what she perceived as a contradiction between the company’s values and behaviors of diversity. She shared:

Seeing our company's name being so recognized for being a great place to work for working moms, and veterans, and people of varying abilities and stuff like that. That's great to see, but when you're a person on the ground, and the only Black woman in the room, sometimes it's easy to feel out of touch.

Emilia shared her disappointment when she discovered that the company to which she had transitioned from college, lacked the diversity of gender, race, or ethnicity that she believed would make her feel like a valued member of the team. Moreover, Emilia noted that her boss, a White male, was unfamiliar with supervising people of color or women. She stated,

I was the only female analyst, and there was one other woman on the team. It was 30 of us, which was really disgusting. And my boss had no idea how to handle having women on the team or people of color.

Malik, reflecting on his college-to-career experience and communicating the need for support and guidance from someone with similar experiences and backgrounds, stated, “As a man of color, there's certain things that a white woman wouldn't be able to tell me just because she's perceived in the corporate setting a bit differently than I am.”

A few participants indicated how racial bias and microaggressions influenced workplace experiences and career progression. Matías shared a racially charged incident that caused him to disengage from his manager,

In certain situations, in my work, especially social settings, older White males make a lot of statements that are pretty negative to people of color. I had this conversation with other people of color my age, and a lot of them don't know how to navigate those situations. So, for example, one time at a project, we took our client for dinner, and I was the only young person, I was the only person of color as well. I forget what the conversation was about, but my manager pretty much made a joke about for Halloween he was dressed as a bad hombre, and his wife was the wall—A reference to, like, Trump, yeah. Everyone just laughed, and I . . . I'm not Mexican, so I was still offended as a person of color, but I would imagine
how a Mexican would feel in a situation like that.

Matías recognized the negative implications of interactions like this for self-confidence and career progression, stating, “I think those types of situations can really affect your self-esteem, or it can affect your interactions with senior-level people in a company. It can definitely affect your progression in a company.”

Nailah found one workplace to be too difficult to endure and left because of the racially offensive behavior she reported experiencing. She stated:

I really learned a lot about what it means to be a Black woman in a White space in corporate America and the challenges and the microaggressions. Because I dealt with that a lot and it was terrible. I worked in a trading floor. So, trading floor has like 500 people and I think there were three Black women and like two Black men…I think by the time we left there were like two Black people on the 500-person floor. I think it was like I was dealing with a lot of bullshit from the culture. The people were low-key racist. So, Barack Obama got elected in 2009... the stuff that people would say, like, "Lord, have mercy. It was so taxing on my soul to have to go there every single day and listen to what they would say about this man. It was just the worst thing ever. And I don't even think I realized how bad and toxic that environment must have been for me, but I look back and I'm like, how did you deal with that?

Imani asserted her belief that people of color are given inadequate professional development and are passed over for career advancement, thus driving workplace turnover for this same group. She shared, “I think the difficulty is that in such a corporate environment, I don't feel like minority candidates are [not] cultivated enough, and as a result, you see a lot of people leave.”

Nando reported an overlooked intra-cultural, discriminatory issue: colorism. As a White, Hispanic in a predominantly White workplace, Nando pointed out a bias based on the shade of one’s color within the same race or ethnic group. He noted what he perceived as intra-racial bias, whether implicit or explicit, against Black Hispanics that can be equally harmful as inter-racial bias and discrimination, stating,
There was actually a number of Hispanics on my floor. I feel like this is when I started realizing the gap, even within certain ethnic groups. I noticed a lot of Latinos, but a lot of White Latinos. Even myself. That's when I realized, “Wow, there's not a lot of Afro Latino representation in business either, right?” I remember they would talk about, “Oh, yeah we're closing down ‘cause there's a lot of Latinos here.” But, no, we're so missing a big chunk of our crew. It really opened my eyes. A lot of Colombians, and Ecuadorians, but White Colombians, and Ecuadorians, and Mexicans. With that, you know there’s Hispanics, they had been living here for 10, 15, 20 years and they were very much a part of this culture.

**Finding Summary: Research Question 2.**

The five forces that emerged from the findings had varying degrees of impact at different stages of the college-to-career transition experience. Persistence is the one force that the selected participants drew on at all stages of their college-to-career transition experience. The FGC graduates in this study persisted from pre-college, during college to post-college to pursue and achieve their college-to-career goals. They reported persisting through high and low self-confidence to overcome significant challenges throughout their college-to-career experience.

The selected participants navigated difficult socioeconomic conditions and family hardships, coming from primarily low-income and working-class households where financial instability was often a real and present threat. At the same time, the FGC graduates leveraged parental, family and community support to facilitate their college-to-career transition experience, particularly during the pre-college stage and to a lesser extent in the during-and after-college stages. Participants in this study had to learn to turn to perceived barriers, such as being a first-generation immigrant or a first-generation college student, into motivators and assets. Many reported drawing strengths from difficult circumstances, particularly at the during-college stage of their college-to-career transition experience.
The FGC graduate participants in this study recognized that they could expect limited college-to-career support from their parents who never attained a bachelor’s degree. Therefore, the participants sought college and career preparatory support during the pre-college and during-college stages of their college-to-career transition. In some cases, participants were able to continue to draw on the career and personal development knowledge they gained during college, particularly from MLT, for their post-college career experiences.

Networking, the fourth force, was used to the greatest extent during college as the participants searched for jobs. The skill of networking would also become important to the participants after college. Even though some participants did not understand the value of networking during college and as students in the MLT networking workshops, most come to appreciate the essential role that networking can play in career advancement, identifying networking as one of the most important career development and college-to-career skills in response to a question to identify most effective job search strategies. Race, the fifth force, also influenced the college-to-career experiences, during- and after-college than in the pre-college stage of the college-to-career transition. Participants in the study reported numerous incidents of bias, discrimination, and micro-aggression.
“Dreams do come true, but not without the help of others, a good education, a strong work ethic, and the courage to lean in,” asserted Ursula Burns, the first Black CEO of a Fortune 500 company, who is also a Black Hispanic first-generation college graduate and first-generation immigrant (Lean In, n.d., para. 1).

Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

In this final chapter, I discuss findings and their connection to research, implications for future research and practice, and the conclusion drawn from the interviews of the 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants who transitioned from college to career. Like Ursula Burns, the selected participants in this study realized their college-to-career “dreams…but not without the help of others, a good education, a strong work ethic, and the courage to lean in” (Lean In, n.d., para. 1). Additionally, the five forces of family, perseverance, preparation, networking, and race influenced, both positively and negatively, the college-to-career experience of the selected participants in this study.

The 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study “beat the odds” (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996), gaining strength from their struggles to accomplish remarkable college-to-career outcomes at an early stage in their careers. As the selected participants advance in their careers, the six prominent Black and Hispanic FGC graduate luminaries featured throughout this dissertation provide examples of future career possibilities: (1) Michelle Obama, first Black First Lady of the United States of America; (2) Franklin Chang-Diaz, first U.S. Hispanic Astronaut; (3) Sonia Sotomayor, first Hispanic Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; (4) Oprah Winfrey, first U.S. Black multibillionaire and CEO of OWN, global media company; (5) Ursula Burns, first Black
Connecting Findings to Existing Literature

In many ways, the selected Black and Hispanic FGC graduates in this study are like other first-generation college students and graduates, hailing from low-income, working-class families, with parents who have not yet attained bachelor’s degrees (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; NCES, 2015). On the other hand, these individuals—who “beat the odds”—are very different from the research profiles of their FGC peers. All participants in this study attained a bachelor’s degree, with nearly 100% receiving their degree in four years compared to the six-year bachelor’s degree completion rate of 50% for other FGCS students (DeAngelo et al., 2011). Another way in which these selected Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants beat the odds is they all transitioned directly from college to a career-related job, different from too many of their Black and Hispanic college graduate peers who struggle with disproportionately high unemployment rates. In 2017, the unemployment rates for Black and Hispanic college graduates were 8.0% and 6.8%, respectively, compared to 4.9% for their White peers, more than 50% less than the rate for Blacks.

To deepen my understanding of the FGC graduates’ college-to-career experiences as well as gain knowledge about the forces influencing those experiences, I analyzed the stories shared during the interviews through the prisms of human capital theory and social cognitive career theory (SCCT). Human capital theory (Becker, 1992; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016) posits that investments in education yield positive returns through higher wages, upward socioeconomic mobility, increased societal engagement
and other positive outcomes. SCCT (Lent et al., 2000) postulates that career choices, decisions, and outcomes, in other words, the college-to-career transition, are influenced by “complex, reciprocal linkages” (p. 36). The theory (Lent et al., 2002) asserts that career outcomes are influenced by “person, environmental, and behavior variables” (p. 36). Person variables are personal inputs such as ethnicity, race, gender, and environmental variables are contextual supports and barriers, such as socioeconomic status, parental education, and family background factors that contribute to an individual’s career choices and decisions. Behavioral variables are defined as an individual’s self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals.

The SCCT model is a useful framework for making meaning of the college-to-career experiences of the Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study. These individuals operate within the intersectionality of multiple identities, as they are from low-income families, racial/ethnic minoritized group members, FGC graduates, first-generation immigrants, and high-achievers. Like other researchers (Aronson et al., 2015; Olson, 2014; Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016; Storlie et al., 2015; Tate et al., 2015), this study uses SCCT to gain a deeper understanding of forces influencing the college-to-career experience about the selected participants.

Guided by the SCCT framework, five forces emerged as influencing the college-to-career experiences of participants: family, persistence, preparation, networking, and race. For the participants in this study, three aspects of their family background (socioeconomic status and family hardships; first-generation immigrant status; and parental, family, and community support) seemed to have influenced their college-to-career experience. According to Lent (2000), the environment in which a person was
raised can have positive or negative influences, becoming a “support” or a “barrier” (p. 47). The participants in this study demonstrated this dichotomy. For example, being a first-generation immigrant requires an individual to adjust to a foreign and strange land but at the same time can strengthen the resolve to graduate from college, obtain a “good” job, and provide for one’s family. This sentiment was expressed repeatedly by the first-generation immigrant participants in this study. Another contextual force that can be both a barrier and support is poverty. While most FGC participants in this study came from low-income families and worried a lot about finances, most were able to attend selective colleges because they obtained need-based financial assistance.

Participants in this study exhibited persistence through their self-confidence and by overcoming challenges. This force parallels the SCCT construct of self-efficacy which posits that an individual’s career-related self-efficacy can be strengthened through positive, reinforcing interactions and increased knowledge in a “task-specific” domain (Lent et al., 2006, p. 16). Lent and colleagues further state: “successful and persistent performance often calls for confidence,” enabling an individual to be successful at domain-specific tasks or goals (p. 16). Conversely, low self-efficacy, resulting from a lack of belief in one’s ability to be successful, can lead to career derailment. In both cases, direct and vicarious learning, such as career and college preparatory programs, mentoring, coaching, role modeling, can be beneficial or detrimental forces influencing the career outcome of participants (Lent, 2000, 2006).

The FGC graduates in this study shared many challenges that they had to overcome on their path into and through college and to their career goals. Participants remained confident but also offered examples of when their confidence waned. The
Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study persisted, completing their bachelor’s degrees, and transitioning from college to career. The career related self-efficacy beliefs of the selected participants were generally a positive, influential force in their college-to-career transition experiences of the participants in this study.

Also important to the college-to-career transitions of individuals in this study were college and career preparation, programming, and support. SCCT posits that learning experiences such as college and career preparation can “moderate and directly affect the processes by which people make and implement career-relevant choices” (Lent et al., 2006, p. 38) by providing knowledge and information to inform and expand career choices. The individuals in this study described the college and career preparation resources that they believed facilitated their college-to-career transition success.

Participants in this study began preparing for college and career at young ages. Some described preparation that began in middle school when they enrolled in college preparatory programs that would allow them to gain admission to rigorous public and private high schools in their areas. The preparation continued through college when they enrolled in the career preparation program of MLT. Some participants also utilized the career services at their respective colleges and universities. The SCCT constructs of personal goals and outcome expectations are evident in the preparation forces. The 23 FGC graduate participants were all high-achievers, a requirement to participate in the MLT career preparation program. They offered multiple examples of keen focus on and commitment to college and career preparation. Participants established a goal of attaining a bachelor’s degree, and expected to transition from college to career, goals that they all achieved.
Several participants reported that they believed that the attainment of a bachelor’s degree would position them to earn higher wages, an expectation consistent with the data (Carnevale et al., 2011). Consistent with available data and prior research, the FGC participants in this study believed that higher education credentials were a gateway to increased earnings and career advancement. Choy (2002) asserted, “Students enroll in college for many reasons, but most expect that earning a degree will improve their employability and their salary, both immediately and in the longer term” (p. 29). Carnevale et al. (2011) reported that an undergraduate degree is expected to generate 84% more earnings over a lifetime than a high school diploma—the equivalent of a $2.8 million earning premium.

Participants in this study also perceived the value of career preparation activities to the college-to-career experience. All participants in this study completed the MLT career preparation program, reflecting an explicit or implicit perception of the value of fortifying and expanding their career preparation skills and ability. Many shared that they recognized the limited career benefits that could derive from parents who had not attained a bachelor’s degree and had not worked in the professional careers they expected to attain. The participants sought an organization that would provide them career and professional development skills, facilitate their exploration of careers, and connect them with employers as well as like-minded peers with whom they could travel the same career journey, support, and learn from each other.

Every participant believed that the MLT career preparation program made a difference in their college-to-career experience. Even participants who did not secure their final job through MLT believed that they received lifelong professional and career
development skills that they would continue to leverage after accepting their first post-college job offer. Many students reported that the MLT one-on-one career coaching was a helpful resource. Some participants reported that the coaching conversations and supportive relationships with their career coaches met their career and professional developmental needs. Additionally, participants reported that they established rapport with the coach and became comfortable asking sometimes uncomfortable questions that they could not ask others, including family members who had not worked in the professional environments the participants targeted for post-college employment. Several participants reported that they saw their career coaches as someone to hold them accountable for completing their career preparation assignments and staying on track with their college-to-career transition.

Fouad et al. (2010) reports that family relations are important forces in the college-to-career experiences of students since parents and family are strong, influential career models for students. Black and Hispanic FGC students with parents who have not attained bachelor’s degree and work blue-collar jobs likely have less direct access to professional career modeling that non-FGC students. MLT career coaches may address this gap by providing professional and career role modeling.

Most FGC graduate participants in this study cited networking as an influential force in their college-to-career experience. Once participants learned the value of networking, they established reciprocal relationships which they accessed for career-related resources and information, and access to professional people in their networks. Initially, many of the FGC participants were reluctant to network on college campus or beyond, a finding consistent with other research on FGC students (Eismann, 2015; Parks-
Yancy, 2012; Tate et al., 2015; Ward et al., 2012). Nonetheless, the Black and Hispanic FGC graduates in this study came to understand and appreciate the criticality of networking to their college-to-career transition. The MLT career preparation program stressed the importance of networking and required participants to apply their networking skill development at the four career conferences held during their 18-month program. A few individuals reported realizing the importance of networking only after transitioning from college-to-career.

Participants reported that networking yielded many benefits, including access to internships, job shadowing, job leads, and full-time positions. Participants reported that the positive networking outcomes increased their self-efficacy about networking which in turn led participants to expand their networks and career opportunities, a career multiplying affect. Networking can be a critical force in achieving job search success and attaining the desired college-to-career outcomes, especially for Black and Hispanic FGC graduates (Parks-Yancy, 2012). Eismann (2016), Gould and Kroeger (2017), and Parks-Yancy (2012) posited that the lack of access to social and professional networks may adversely impact job search outcomes of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates. Moreover, an inadequate network may also hinder their ability to tap into the “hidden job market” (Hatala & Yamkovenko, 2016).

The fifth force that emerged from the interview data is the role of race, including discrimination and bias, on college campuses and in the workplace. Becker (1992, 1994) posits that race/ethnic discrimination can adversely impact returns on human capital investments. Some employers will make “taste-based” (Becker, 1994) discriminatory employment decision based on racial or ethnic preference, negatively impacting
employment outcomes. Gould and Kroeger (2017) also point out the disproportionality in the employment rates between Black and Hispanic college graduates with similar backgrounds compared to their White college graduate peers. Gaddis (2015) and Nunley et al. (2014) found racial discrimination in hiring decisions for studies they conducted comparing job search outcomes of Black and White similarly situated applicants.

Considering some discriminatory practices, it is no surprise that some Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study reported experiencing racial and ethnic discrimination, biases, and/or microaggressions on college campuses and at work. Many of the FGC graduates who reported some discriminatory encounter on their college campuses were able to counterbalance those feelings by joining cultural, racial, or ethnic affinity clubs or organizations. Some reported that discovering an affinity group was “finding a place they could belong,” a “place where they did not feel judged,” and where “they could be themselves.”

For the most part, the Black and Hispanic FGC students maintained a positive disposition, determined to succeed despite the discriminatory and bias incidents that they believed they encountered. On several occasions, however, participants reported that what they believed to be racial discrimination adversely impacted their productivity, as well as if they would accept an offer or resign from a given company. SCCT posits that environmental factors such as discrimination can negatively impact the self-efficacy of individuals, which can contribute to a decline in productivity and performance, and eventually lead to career derailment (Lent et al., 2000, 2002, 2006, 2017). Many participants reported that they were not prepared for what they believed were biased and discriminatory practices and behaviors in the workplace.
In summary, the college-to-career experiences of the 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduates have “complex, reciprocal linkages” to the environmental, behavioral, and personal forces that influence the career-related outcomes (Lent et al., 2000, p.36). In this study, each participant demonstrated positive career-related self-efficacy, established personal goals, and focused on career outcome expectations, critical constructs in the college-to-career transition experience (Lent et al. 2006, 2016). As a result, all participants successfully transitioned from college-to-career and into a career-related job after graduation.

Many participants shared that they believed the road to a “better life” was to work hard in college, perform well academically, attain a bachelor’s degree and transition from college to career into a professional position related to their academic studies with high wages or the potential for future high compensation. Many of the Black and Hispanic first-generation college graduate participants in this study believed that the path to realizing their American Dream was through higher education credentials. Many believed that the attainment of a bachelor’s degree would provide them access to careers that would provide them the financial means the longed for so that they could provide a better life for themselves, their families, and their communities.

Growing up in impoverished communities in households with limited financial means, the participants primarily viewed bachelor’s degree attainment as a means to a financial end, believing that access to financial wealth would solve their poverty-plagued upbringings. Instead, what many discovered is that they yearned for something more than money: They wanted purposeful work and a sense of belonging in the workplace. Many participants reported that they felt like outsiders in their place of employment and
therefore could not be their authentic selves in a place where they spent a significant portion of their day. Employment does not erase some of the barriers and negative environmental forces that can influence the next phase of their college-to-career transition—career advancement.

Many participants reported that they still battled feelings of inadequacy and negotiated for a place where they felt like they belonged. The education and employment achievements did not shield the participants from discriminatory behaviors even though their employment outcomes were better than other Black and Hispanic college graduates. Several participants reported being at a career crossroads, wondering whether they wanted to continue in the job that they fought so hard to obtain, switch to a different industry or discipline, or pursue other academic or career options. Of the 12 participants in this study who switched employers between 2008 and 2017, the 9-year post-college period of this study, only four switched industries, an indication of some level of satisfaction with the type of work they were doing but not the employer. However, the high turnover in jobs suggest some level of dissatisfaction with the duties, work environment, company culture or other factors driving once highly motivated, engaged employees to depart for other employment opportunities.

For some participants in this study contemplating career shifts, they reported that they were able to revisit some of the professional development and life skills learned at MLT to evaluate next steps (e.g., tap into their networks, conduct informational interviews, research careers and companies, read career books, enroll in classes, contact their prior MLT coach, connect with MLT alums). In other cases, participants either accessed their networks or believed they could leverage their networks to find another
job. In the case of a few participants, they either pursued, planned to pursue, or were currently enrolled in graduate school to advance their careers.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study explored the college-to-career experiences of 23 FGC graduate participants and highlighted forces that influenced their college-to-career transition experience. The research on the college-to-career experiences of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates is limited. Using a qualitative approach, this study examined the lived experiences of the participants to gain a deeper understanding of “common or shared” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81) experiences that this group encountered as well as strategies that could be foundational to successful college-to-career transition for future FGC graduates.

In this study, surprisingly, most participants were not only first-generation college graduates, but also first-generation immigrants who are also United States citizens or residents. This may indicate a need to further explore the college-to-career experiences of this segment of the FGC graduate population. Research should further explore the college-to-career experience of individuals with varying immigration statuses.

The study included only Black and Hispanic first-generation college graduates who completed bachelor’s degrees and held full-time employment positions after graduating from college. Additional research is required to understand the college-to-career transitions of Black and Hispanic FGC students who do not complete their bachelor’s degrees as well as Black and Hispanic FGC graduates who do not hold full-time employment. Future research comparing FGC graduate participants who were unsuccessful with their college-to-career transition to those who were successful may provide new insights into the college-to-career transition phenomenon.
Most of the participants in this study had business-related degrees and all had completed a structured career preparation program. Exploring the college-to-career experiences of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates with other majors as well as the experiences of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates who did not have access to a similar structured career preparation program would also be instructive.

I offer several additional suggestions for future consideration. Future research should consider the college to career transitions of students whose characteristics are more closely reflective of FGC students, including individuals who enter college at older ages, attend part-time rather than full-time, attend less-selective colleges and universities, perform at lower academic levels, and work full-time while taking courses (Choy, 2002; Davis, 2010; Jehangir, 2010; NCES, 2016; PNPI, 2016). The participants in this study were all Black and Hispanic FGC graduates who attended elite and selective colleges and universities and were high academic achievers in college. As such, in many ways the students in this study were more like non-first-generation college graduates. The participants in this study attended elite or selective colleges and universities, different from the other FGC graduates who disproportionately attend for-profit and less selective colleges and universities and complete their bachelor’s degrees at lower rates (DeAngelo, et al., 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2004; Pascarella, Pierson & Wolniak, 2005; Ward et al., 2012).

Finally, I recommend that future research explore the college-to-career experience of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates who have been in the workforce between five to ten years as the primary focus of this study was on the college-to-career experience during the more recent years after attaining a bachelor’s degree, generally five years or
less. Considering the high turnover in post-college careers and the disengagement and dissatisfaction expressed by a number of participants, exploring the post-college career experiences at different intervals in the participants’ career is essential to positioning them for sustained career success and socio-economic prosperity.

Implications for Practice

The 23 FGC graduate participants in this study benefited from the network, relationships and resources derived from being an MLT College Prep Fellow, something not available to most FGC graduates. Findings from this study may have insights for administrators of campus-based career services units, especially as they seek to meet the career preparation and job placement needs of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates. Andy Chan, vice president for personal and career development at Wake Forest University, posited that the time has come for campus-based career services offices to shift from a transactional to a strategic model, transforming the college-to-career experience of the students who have already invested in their higher education institution to attain higher wages and a better life. Chan offers the following Roadmap for Transforming the College-to-Career Experience (Grasgreen, 2013):

1. Develop a bold vision and mission for personal career development;
2. Secure backing from institutional leadership;
3. Strategically position the personal and career development leadership role;
4. Strategically transform, build, and align personal and career development organization and staff;
5. Gather and report personal and career development outcome data to all constituents;
6. Engage and equip a college-to-career community of influences with a focus on faculty and parents; and
7. Implement programs so personal & career development is a mission critical component of a student’s college experience (p. 21-27).
In addition to Chan’s recommendations (Chan & Derry, 2013), administrators should also consider how to integrate culturally and socioeconomically practices, programs, policies, performance metrics and communication into integral part of all career services units, ensuring people of diverse backgrounds feel welcome to engage in and be serviced by the transformed offices of career services. Gallup (2016) reported that FGC students utilized career services at lower levels than non-FGC students but once they began to use the services they found them useful. This finding may suggest a lack of familiarity with college resources and their value, indicating the importance of intentional, strategic, engaging outreach to FGC as well as Black and Hispanic students.

Additionally, considering the racial and ethnic challenges that many of the Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study reported as well as their difficulty feeling like they belong, it may be prudent for career services to offer training for students on how to navigate race and belonging in the workplace. Courses and training on this topic can be instructive for both minority and majority populations. The participants in this study were often ill-equipped to handle discrimination in the workplace and non-minority students may also be just as uneasy. Participants reported discriminatory and bias encounters that adversely impacted their workplaces and may be contributing to turnover in the job.

The results of this dissertation may also be instructive for employers seeking to attract, recruit, develop, and retain Black and Hispanic FGC graduates. Employers should examine their work culture and practices to ensure that they are not repelling instead of attracting this population. Participants in this study entered the workplace with high expectations for career growth and development but many ended up disillusioned and
dispirited after a few short years, resigning from the organization that once brought so much mutual promise.

Several participants expressed disappointment about where their careers are today with many seeking to change jobs, industries, or companies. For some, they spoke of not feeling like they belonged and not being able to be themselves. This state of being can wear one down and reduce productivity. Employers and researchers should further explore the career experiences of FGC graduates a few years after they begin their post-college job and examine how that experience might inform earlier career and academic preparation for this group. The 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduates in this study have so much promise. It is my hope that employers will fully embrace the bright, high-achieving, creative talent that is expected to help transform the population of the United States of America and bring greater diversity into the U.S. workplace by 2060 (Colby & Ortman, 2015; Frey, 2015).

Conclusion

This dissertation examined college-to-career experiences of Black and Hispanic FGC graduates, seeking to uncover forces that influenced their transition. As stated in the introduction: The path to higher earning careers is through higher education (Carnevale et al., 2011). It is imperative that we better understand the forces that contribute to a successful college-to-career transition for Black and Hispanic FGC graduates to help counterbalance negative forces of discrimination and bias that often derail the career success of this population.

This dissertation elucidated the role that family, persistence, preparation, networking, and race played in the college-to-career experience of the 23 selected
participants in this study. While generalizability is not the goal of a qualitative research study, findings may be instructive for researchers, employers, career coaches, career administrators, academics, families, and other stakeholders with an interest in ensuring smooth and successful college-to-career transitions of FGC graduates and post-graduate career advancement.

The 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study imagined a better future for themselves and achieved it. The participants worked smart and hard to realize their amazing college-to-career accomplishments, demonstrating the power of nurturing, and unleashing human potential, regardless of race, ethnicity, income, parental education, or other factors. The college-to-career experience of the 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study exemplified what Kenneth C. Frazier, a featured Black first-generation college graduate luminary who is the first Black CEO heading a major pharmaceutical company and one of only 3 Black CEOs leading a Fortune 500 company, asserted:

“Our country’s strength stems from its diversity and the contributions made by men and women of different faiths, races, sexual orientations and political beliefs” (Leaf, 2017, Statement, para. 2).

Perhaps, by understanding the forces that influence the college-to-career transition of the 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study, we can unleash the potential of all college graduates, regardless of differences in “faiths, races, sexual orientations and political beliefs” (Leaf, 2017, Statement, para.2) and facilitate access to career-enhancing resources, information, and networks so that the American Dream can more easily be realized by all Americans.
APPENDIX A

MLT’s Career Prep Alum Invitation

Reminder: Get $50 and help advance understanding of college-to-career transitions for first generation minorities

If you are a first generation college graduate, I am hoping you will consider helping a doctoral student at UPenn’s Graduate School of Education, Jeannette Frett, with her very timely and MLT-relevant research. Ms. Frett is seeking to better understand the college-to-career transition of first-generation college graduates, with a focus on Asians and Hispanics. This research is important because the findings will provide data that could assist with improving job placement and career advancement outcomes for aspiring leaders and emerging professionals like you. If interested just send me a quick note, DSaccoco@MLT.org, and we’ll be in touch.

By way of further background, Ms. Frett is seeking up to twenty (20) MLT Career Prep (CP) Rising Leaders who are first-generation college graduates (their parents have not obtained a bachelor's degree) and who attained an undergraduate degree from an American public or private, non-profit higher education institution between Jan 1, 2014 and Dec 31, 2016. The selected college graduates should ideally be between the age of 25-35, working full-time and living within the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area which includes DC and neighboring cities in VA, MD, and WV.

CP Rising Leaders who participate in this study will be asked to share their personal, lived experience of transitioning from college to career during a 60-minute one-on-one interview with Ms. Frett, the UPenn doctoral researcher. Additionally, CP Alumni are expected to participate in a small focus group to further discuss college-to-career transitions. Interviews and focus groups will be conducted primarily between October 6 - 31, 2017 at a convenient location and a $50 gift certificate will be provided to all participants who complete the research activities.

Please inform me via email at DSaccoco@MLT.org by October 11, 2017 if your interest in participating. I can also be reached at 301-264-5754 should you want to talk with me directly about this opportunity. A summary sheet of this dissertation research project is available here to provide you additional details. Finally, background information about Ms. Frett can be found at https://www.linkedin.com/in/sanrecht/. I encourage you to consider this opportunity to share your authentic, personal stories to this important college-to-career transition research project. I believe the findings, with your input, could be beneficial for us all. Thank you for your consideration.

Warm regards,

Dr. Damian Saccoco
MLT VP, Technology and Analytics
### Participant’s Verification Form

College-to-Career Research Project  
Graduate School of Education University of Pennsylvania

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</table>
| 1.     | I am a first-generation college graduate.  
|        | • Defined as an undergraduate college graduate whose parent(s) never attained a bachelor’s degree.  
|        | • If your parent(s) took college courses but never graduated, you ARE a first-generation college graduate and meet this requirement. |              |
| 2.     | My race/ethnicity is Black. |              |
| 3.     | My race/ethnicity is Hispanic. |              |
| 4.     | I am between the age of 22-33.  
|        | • What is your age? ___________________________ |              |
| 5.     | I am an American citizen. |              |
| 6.     | I am male. |              |
| 7.     | I am female. |              |
| 8.     | I graduated with a bachelor’s degree before January 01, 2017.  
|        | • What date? __________________________________ |              |
| 9.     | I attained an undergraduate degree from an American public or non-profit, private college or university.  
|        | • Which institution? ___________________________ |              |
| 10.    | I do not yet have a graduate degree. |              |
| 11.    | I am working full-time or was working full-time after graduating from college?  
|        | • With which organization? ______________________   
|        | • In what position? ___________________________ |              |
| 12.    | I lived **and** worked in the Mid-Atlantic states (Washington DC, Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, or West Virginia) or contiguous metropolitan area (MSA).  
|        | • In which state do you live? _____________________  
|        | • In which state do you work? _____________________ |              |
| 13.    | I agree to have my interview recorded for this research project. |              |

**Participant Signature of Verification**

________________________________________
APPENDIX C

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

PART ONE: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1) Pre-College Experience
   a) Family Experience
      i) *Hometown.* Tell me a little bit about your hometown, where you grew up.
      ii) *Parents & household.* Tell me about your parent’s level of education, your family, how you grew up. What kind of work did your parents do?
      iii) *Family socioeconomic status.* How would you describe your family’s economic status when you were growing up?
   b) College Preparation & Selection
      i) *College prep efforts.* Tell me about how you prepared for college. How would you describe your high school?
      ii) *Family support.* What happened the first time you talked to a parent or family member about going to college? How did you decide to tell them? What was their response? Did you feel like your family was encouraging (or resisting) your pursuit of college?
      iii) *College Selection.* Tell me about the college you attended. How did you choose this college?

2) During-College Experience
   a) Campus Life & Academics
      i) *Academics.* Let’s talk about your time in college. What was the hardest part? What did you adjust to best? What was the academic side of college like for you? Did you feel prepared for the academic rigor?
      ii) *Choosing a major.* How did you choose your major? Tell me about your sibling’s college experience, your family involvement/input in your choice of major. What do you now wish someone had told you before college, before choosing your major, before you graduated from college?
      iii) *Co-curricular activities.* Were you involved in any extra-curricular activities?
   b) Work & Finances During College
i) *Internship, community service, and other work.* Did you have any jobs while you were in college? Tell me about one of those jobs. Did you volunteer or have any internships? Tell me about one of those experiences.

ii) *College Finances.* How did you finance college? Did you have loans? If so, how much? Did your loans/finances influence your career decision?

iii) *College Completion.* How many years did it take to complete your degree? Did you finish in 4 years? When did you graduate?

c) College-to-Career Transition Activities

i) *MLT Career Prep.* How did you find out about MLT? Describe your MLT experience?

ii) *Career Services.* Which career services did you use? Why? How frequent? Effectiveness? What do you wish they would do differently to get you to use it more?

iii) *Other College and Career Prep Programs.* Describe any other college or career prep programs that you participated in? Tell me about the program(s) and your experience? How did the program(s) help you?

iv) *Career-Related Networks, Resources, and Information.* What information, resources and social networks did you use to facilitate your college to career transition? What is the source of your information, resources and social networks used for career search support? Which resources originated from your family? Where else? What were most effective? Why? Least effective? Why?

v) *The Job Offer.* How did you get your first post-college job? (Prompt: What was your job search like? Did you turn down any other job offers, before accepting this job? Was accepting this job an—easy decision?)

vi) *Parental/Family Support in Job Search.* What happened when you told your parents (or family) about getting this job?

3) **Post-College Experience**

a) **First Job After College**

i) *Job duties.* Tell me about your first job after you graduated from college.

(Prompt: How would you describe your job to someone who did not know
anything about what you do? How did you spend a typical day at your job? Was it what you were expecting? If not, why? If yes, how?

ii) First Day: Tell me about your first day at your first post-college job. Did you talk with your friends about your job? What were those conversations like? Have you had other full-time jobs since graduating? Where are you living now?

b) Current Job

i) Job duties: Tell me about your current job. (Prompt: How would you describe your job to someone who did not know anything about what you do? How do you spend a typical day at your job?)

ii) Parental/Family Support on the Job. Do you talk with your family about things that happen at work? (Could you give me an example?) If so, what do they say? If not, why not?

c) Work Environment

i) Manager Relationship. How would you describe your relationship with your boss? Has there been a time when he or she encouraged you? Or corrected you?

ii) Coworker Relationship. Have any of your co-workers been particularly helpful to you? In what ways? Can you recall a specific time this person helped you?

iii) Job Satisfaction. Tell me about your best day at your first or current post-college job. What made this day your—best day? Tell me about the worst day you have had at this job. If you no longer had to work, what would you miss about working? What would you not miss?

iv) Job Selection. If you knew then what you know now about your current job, would you have taken the job? Why or why not?

d) Career Expectations

i) Job Engagement. Is your job what you expected? Do you have an example of how it is what you expected? Or maybe an example of how it is different from what you expected? Do you think your experience in college has influenced the way you think about your career? In what ways? Or why not?
ii) *Next Job.* Have you thought about what you want your next job to be? How would it be different from the job you have now?

iii) *Meaning of Work.* What makes a job a—good job? a good employee? In what ways do you think your definition of good employee—or good job—might be different from your parents or family?

**PART TWO: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1) **Reflection**
   a) *Post-College Expectations.* What did you think after-college work and life would be like?
   b) *Top Job Search Strategies.* What were the top three or more strategies (resources, information sources or social networks) that you found most helpful in securing your first job (and other jobs) after college?
   c) *First-Generation College Student/Graduate.* How has being a first-generation college student/graduate influenced or not influenced your decisions or behavior?
   d) *Your Success.* Do you consider yourself successful? Why?
   e) *Graduate School.* Have you thought about pursuing graduate school or further formal education? Under what circumstances could you see yourself going back to school?
   f) *New Information.* What do you think I should know that we have not discussed?
APPENDIX D

Initial Coding of Interview Transcripts

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APPENDIX E

Brief Bios of the 23 First-Generation Graduate Participants

These bios, highlighting the college-to-career experiences of the selected participants in this study, represent the diversity of the 23 Black and Hispanic FGC graduate participants in this study.

Aaliyah. A Black woman, age 30, the youngest of three children, Aaliyah was raised in one of the New York City boroughs by parents who immigrated to the United States from the Caribbean. She grew up with both parents in a working-class, Black, and Hispanic community where her mother, who completed an associate’s degree, and her father, who attained a high school diploma, worked as a bank teller and city transit worker, respectively. After a competitive selection process, she was accepted to and attended an elite, private high school on full merit scholarship.

Aaliyah graduated from an elite undergraduate school in 2009 and transitioned directly from college to the position of analyst for a Fortune 500 financial services company. After a decade of career progression working at different companies, she moved to a multi-billion-dollar mass media company where she is currently a director in a senior leadership role. She also earned master’s degrees from two different elite graduate schools during the 10 years since she attained her bachelor’s degree. When I asked her if she considers herself successful, Aaliyah responded,

I do think I’m successful. I think I have achieved a lot in my 30 years if you will. . . and I think I’ve only been able to achieve this level of ‘success’ with the help of those around me.” She later shared, “Despite my ‘success’ at this stage, I’m not complacent, not stopping, and recognize that I still have a lot of work to do to get to where I want to be.
**Abigail.** A Black woman, age 29, Abigail was born and raised in a New York City borough and grew up in a two-parent household with her twin, older sibling, and grandmother. Neither of her parents, who immigrated from Africa, attained a bachelor’s degree. Her father worked as a taxi driver and her mother was a home health aide worker, both working blue-collar jobs. All three children attained bachelor’s degrees. One sister served in the U.S. Armed Forces and the other worked a corporate job. Abigail stated that she attended and graduated from one of the top specialized math and science public high schools in her hometown area.

Influenced by the tragedy at the World Trade Center in New York City on September 11, 2001, Abigail, at the age of about 13, decided to pursue a career in public safety and criminal justice, later enrolling in a large, private selective college where she majored in criminal justice and graduated with honors in 2010. After 9/11, Abigail, interested in a career in criminal justice, transitioned directly from college to a position as a specialist in the criminal justice and security field for a federal government agency. Seven years and several employers later she had advanced through the ranks and assumed her current leadership role for the federal government. During that time, she also attained a master’s degree from a highly ranked university. Abigail, reflecting on forces that contributed to her career success, stated, “Being persistent has definitely helped me. And, being curious. And asking questions that’s what I noticed really helped.”

**Adrastros.** A Hispanic man, age 24, Adrastros grew up in a predominantly Hispanic and Black neighborhood in a large metropolitan area in a Southwestern state. He was raised in a low-income, two-parent household with his two siblings, where his father was an entrepreneur working various blue-collar jobs and his mother worked as a
real estate agent. His father, born in a Southwestern state and mother an immigrant from Central America, completed their high school diplomas. Although his father wanted to pursue an undergraduate degree, he declined admissions to college to remain with his growing family after Adrastros, the first of three children, was born. Adrastros shared that, he “liked learning.” He attended a public high school, graduating with an academic scholarship to an elite private, nonprofit university.

In 2015, Adrastros graduated with a bachelor’s degree and immediately began a position as a management consultant for a Fortune 500 company where he has advanced to become a reporting lead analyst. When asked to share forces that contributed to his career success, he stated,

A big part of that is your network, right...Maintaining the old network and getting a new network maintaining your friends and placing importance on that. And, also kind of being very able to ask for help from those networks.

Alejandro. A 26-year-old Hispanic man, Alejandro was born and raised in one of the boroughs of New York City. He grew up in a low-income, two-parent household with three sisters. His mother and father, who immigrated to the United States from Central America, with fourth and second-grade educations, respectively raised him. His father has worked in a blue-collar job at the same warehouse for the last 25 to 30 years and his mother has been a dishwasher at the same restaurant for 15 years. Alejandro was awarded a scholarship to attend an all-boys private Catholic high school from which he graduated and later pursued higher education degrees. He enrolled in a five-year, dual BBA/MBA program at a private, nonprofit university and graduated with both degrees in 2013.

Alejandro transitioned directly from college to a position in accounting at a Fortune 100 company. During his 3.5-year tenure, he advanced to the position of senior
auditor and was on track for a more senior accountant role. Due to what he perceived as lack of support and unrealistic demands, Alejandro left the company and moved to a smaller accounting firm where he now holds the position of senior corporate accountant.

Discussing the work ethics learned from observing his father, Alejandro shared:

And knowing that he’s [his father] getting four or five hours of sleep a night and working extremely hard to make a wage that’s a lot less than my starting wage after graduation . . . I think about my parents and their sacrifices and it reignites the fire within me. . . So certainly, their hard work and sacrifices have meant a lot, and frankly are the biggest factors in my success and the reasons why I’ve wanted to push myself harder every single time.

**Anthony.** A 23-year-old Black man from a low-income family in one of the boroughs of New York City, Anthony is the youngest of three siblings raised in a two-parent household with his mother, a home attendant, and father, a construction worker. A reserved youth, Anthony pursued academic excellence, avoiding the gangs and violence that plagued his community and pushing himself to expand beyond his circumstances. He shared, “I really started to think about how education was important and how I can access my future wealth and better myself and of course, help me to better my society.” Anthony enrolled in and graduated from a local Catholic high school with a college preparatory program in pursuit of realizing the future he envisioned for himself and his family. He shared, “My high school was very formative in the person I am today.”

Anthony was awarded a full scholarship to attend an elite private, non-profit college, where he graduated in 2016 with a bachelor’s degree. He transitioned directly from college to a position in finance where he worked as a management consulting analyst for a Fortune 100 company, expanding his scope and responsibility during his two-year tenure at the firm. Reflecting on the role that being a first-generation college graduate and a minority may have played in his career choice, Anthony responded, “I
knew that as somebody coming from a lower-income background, I needed to have a job that I could make money, a lot of money in so I can support myself and support my family if necessary.” He summarized his journey to achieving the success that he has attained by saying, “I guess a big theme of my story is that I have gotten a lot of help from mentors, especially because I didn’t have a lot of family or friends that I can go to.”

**Barack.** A Black man, age 28, Barack grew up in low-income communities in metropolitan areas on the West Coast. Raised by a single-parent mother who often worked two to three blue-collar jobs, he excelled academically, gaining admissions to a competitive specialized math and science public high school. Barack said that he realized early in life that to escape the gang-ridden neighborhoods in which he lived, education would be key. He stated, “There’s more to it than what I see around . . . I began to realize that there’s another lifestyle. . . The only way that I saw [out of the situation] was through education.” After graduation from high school, he attended a public university from which he graduated with honors and distinction, attaining his bachelor’s degree in 2011.

After graduating from college, Barack transitioned to a position as an analyst in asset management on Wall Street working for a Fortune 100 company. Since graduation, he progressed during his six-year tenure at that company to the position of relationship manager. The following reflection summarizes his perspective about the opportunities and responsibilities that he has been gifted:

I think the way I see the world is because I’m a first-generation college student, I see the world as I’m attempting to break a cycle in my family . . . I feel like that’s a ton of responsibility, and that’s something that I definitely want to take on. I see myself, because I’ve had the awesome resources and opportunities as not only a way to give back to [others] in my family, but to give back to other people outside of my family.
With the help of a full-tuition, merit-based scholarship, Barack is now pursuing a master’s in business administration at an elite graduate business school.

**Emilia.** A 23-year-old, Hispanic woman from the suburbs of a metropolitan area in a Southern state, Emilia was one of four children raised in a working-class, two-parent household by both her mother and father. Her mother, a stay-at-home mom, recently attained her high school equivalency credential (GED) after completing some technical school in Central America and her father attended school through the third grade. Emilia attended a local private high school and, upon graduation, received a scholarship to an elite private, non-profit university. Her mother, who encouraged her to apply to top colleges and universities, was “insanely happy” to see Emilia gain admissions to her top college choice. Emilia proudly shared that her mom “was very supportive and involved [in] my upbringing and school activities.”

Emilia graduated in 2015 in the top of her class and transitioned directly to a position in finance as an investment banking analyst at a Fortune 100 company. After a few years in that role, she decided to switch career trajectories and attained the role of manager of finance for a Fortune 100 mass communications company that she believed had great upward potential. Her post-college work experience has given her an opportunity to re-evaluate the feelings she had growing up about work. Emilia shared:

> When I was younger, a lot of times I would be upset because he [her dad] would miss school stuff. . . As I got older and thought about it more, I was like, “Oh well, the reason I can do this school stuff is because my dad is working really hard to pay for everything.” . . . I was really impressed with a selfless person. I want to be like that.

**Gabriela.** A 31-year-old Black Hispanic woman, Gabriela was born outside the metropolitan area of New York City but raised in a Northeastern region in the United States.
States. She grew up in a low-income, single-parent household with her sister and mother who struggled with substance abuse for the first two decades of Gabriela’s life. Despite the challenges, her mother understood the value of education and enrolled her in an academically rigorous private, Catholic high school, nurturing what Gabriela described as her insatiable appetite for learning. With supportive high school resources, Gabriela found the services to guide her through her family challenges, ensure that she graduated from high school and steer her to college where she was awarded a scholarship. After graduating from high school, she attended an elite private, nonprofit university.

In 2008, Gabriela attained her bachelor’s degree and landed a job as a credit risk analyst at a Fortune 100 company on Wall Street during what is called the greatest financial collapse since the Great Depression. During her seven-year tenure at the company, she advanced to the position of manager and vice president. Seeking new career opportunities, Gabriela left the firm to join another prestigious financial services firm on Wall Street. Gabriela noted in a conversation about overcoming some of her obstacles, “I had a lot of guardian angels in my life working, but it definitely worked out for the best.”

Imani. A 25-year-old Black woman, Imani was raised by a mother who immigrated to the United States from the Caribbean. She was born in one of the boroughs of New York City but grew up in the Caribbean with her grandmother until the age of five when she returned to a metropolitan area of a Southern state in the United States to live with her mother who, like her father, never completed high school. One of four children from a low-income, single-parent household, Imani said she always knew she wanted a career in politics.
She pursued her academic and career goals by attending an elite college on a full scholarship and graduating with honors in 2014 with her bachelor’s degree. After graduating, Imani launched her career with a position as a management consultant for a multi-billion consulting firm. She has since progressed through the ranks at the same company and now holds the role of senior consultant. Imani, reflecting on being the first in her family to attain an undergraduate degree, said, “Okay. I’m the first one in my family and my family is literally one generation removed from being born in [the Caribbean], and it’s like, look, I’m doing the thing.”

**Inyene.** A Black woman, age 29, Inyene is from a borough in New York City where she and her two sisters were raised by parents who immigrated from Africa. Hailing from a working-class, two-parent household, her mother and father, who only attained high school diplomas, worked blue-collar jobs. Inyene attended a specialized public high school from which she graduated with a merit scholarship and attended a selective private, non-profit university. In 2010, she attained a bachelor’s degree, graduating with honors.

Inyene transitioned directly from college to a position as a management consultant, progressively advancing at the same company to her current role of senior consultant. During the subsequent seven years, she worked at different companies eventually assuming her current leadership role as director at a medical institution. She attained a master’s degree from a top graduate school. Inyene, reflecting on the impact of first-generation college status on her life and career, shared, “I think my financial situation, my parent’s financial situation influenced some of the decisions I made. For example, I chose not to study abroad, although it’s something that I would have enjoyed.”
**Jada.** A Black woman, age 30, Jada grew up with her two siblings in a working-class household near a large metropolitan city in a Midwestern state where she lived with her mother, a secretary, and father, a bus driver. She attended a public high school that provided what Jada termed, “a good education” at a predominantly White school with “a good amount of Black people.” After graduating from high school, she enrolled in a public university from which she attained her bachelor’s degree in 2009.

Jada transitioned directly from college to a finance position at a publicly traded investment bank. In the nearly 10 years since she graduated from college, she has progressed through various finance roles at multiple prestigious financial services and investment management companies. At the time of this study, she was a senior auditor for a multibillion Fortune 500 company. Jada, exhausted from the discrimination she believed she encountered coupled with the dislike she has for her career choice, lamented that she is at a career crossroad. She stated that she does not “like talking about [her job].” She asserted, “I don’t think I used all of the resources available to me” during college. Moreover, Jada said, “I just think my path was found too quickly.” Seeking knowledge to guide her to a different career, Jada is now exploring graduate school and evaluating next steps for switching careers.

**Maia.** A Black woman, age 28 and the firstborn of two children, Maia was raised by her mother in a low-income single-parent household in a Mid-Atlantic metropolitan area near the nation’s capital. Her father, although separated from her mother, remained engaged in her life. Maia attended and graduated from a talented and gifted, specialized public high school, and later enrolled in a selective private, non-profit college.
After attaining her bachelor’s degree in 2011, she transitioned to a management consulting position with a Fortune 100 company where she continues to progress. Maia, reflecting on her organization, stated:

Seeing our company’s name being so recognized for being a great place to work for working moms, and veterans, and people of varying abilities and stuff like that. That’s great to see, but when you’re a person on the ground, and the only Black woman in the room, sometimes it’s easy to feel out of touch. I know a lot of us, we felt like the firm does a great job of trying to recruit people of color, but what are they doing to keep the people of color here at the firm?

**Malik.** A 29-year-old Black man, Malik was born and raised in one of the boroughs of New York City in a biracial, low-income, two-parent household with three siblings, a White mother, and a Black father. Neither parent completed high school and his father was unable to read or write. The first 17 years of Malik’s life were filled with instability and tension stemming from his parents being “victims of the crack epidemic that hit in the 80s” which Malik believed “had an effect on their ability to make decisions and pursue education and maintain a career.” Additionally, he was only able to establish a relationship with his father’s (Black) family, whom he said he greatly appreciated, because his mother’s (White) family “exiled her from the family . . . [giving] her an ultimatum of choosing between them and my father.”

Notwithstanding the family challenges, his mother appreciated the value of a “good” education and fought to enroll Malik in a gifted and talented, specialized public middle school after the administration repeatedly refused to enroll him even though he excelled academically. Eventually, the middle school admitted him and that paved the way for him to attend a specialized public high school. Malik graduated from a specialized public high school with multiple full college scholarship awards, electing to
attend a private, non-profit selective university and graduating with a bachelor’s degree in 2011.

After graduating from college, Malik became a teacher, teaching mathematics to middle school students. He remained in his initial role for two years, eventually switching schools to where he progressed to become the mathematics chair at the middle school where he taught until the end of 2016. He is a currently a doctoral student and working at an elite private, non-profit university; he also previously attained a master’s degree in teaching. When asked to define his purpose, Malik shared,

My purpose is one that affirms to me that I need to be serving, in some capacity, vulnerable communities similar to one that I come from and doing so in a way that not just empowers people but also restores dignity and restores humanity.

Matías. A 25-year-old Hispanic man born in a large urban city in a Northeastern state, Matías grew up in a two-parent household until his parents divorced when he was a teenager. When he was three years old, he and his parents moved to Central America, the birthplace of his parents, where they remained until Matías was 13 years of age. Matías and his family returned and settled down in the same Northeastern city in the United States that they departed ten years prior. His father, who held an associate degree from the Central American country where he was a civil engineer, worked “random jobs through friends and family” because he was unable to secure the same level of employment in the United States. Additionally, his father’s limited ability to communicate in English hindered his job prospects. His mother, who became a single-parent after separating from her father once they returned to the United States, worked various blue-collar jobs to provide for their low-income household. Matías attended and
graduated from a local public high school, receiving a full scholarship to a selective public university.

In 2014, Matías attained his bachelor’s degree and transitioned to a senior analyst position at Fortune 500 management consulting firm where he continues to work.

Reflecting on his accomplishments in recent years, Matías said:

I think I’m successful. Actually, when I think about what my family members my age…I think about where they are in their lives . . . I think I’m in a better position financially and career-wise. Coming from the Central America my perspective of success is different. For me, having a good-paying job that gives you the flexibility to do something that you’re interested in . . . that’s success.

Nachelle. A 30-year-old Hispanic woman, Nachelle was born in Central America but immigrated to a large urban city in a Southern state with her parents at the age of one. Raised in a low-income, two-parent household by a mother who is a seamstress and father who is a truck driver, she was one of two children in a close-knit family where both parents only spoke Spanish. Nachelle attended a public high school with college preparatory curriculum and support, graduating with a full academic scholarship to attend an elite private, nonprofit university.

In 2009, Nachelle was awarded a bachelor’s degree after learning to navigate the dual challenge of being the first in her family to attain an undergraduate degree and of being a first-generation immigrant. She recalled:

So, socially it was a huge culture shock. Just not being surrounded by such a strong Latino community, in the smallest things. Like I had never tried hummus. Food was different. People were different. I quickly realized I had an accent. Everybody told me I had an accent. I was like, “No, you have an accent.” It was just clearly different.

She transitioned from college to a position as a management consultant for a Fortune 500 company, later switching companies to be promoted into a leadership role as
a manager at a multi-billion-dollar transportation company. Reflecting on the success she has achieved, Nachelle said, “I have been able to gain financial independence. Enough for myself and for my family . . . and, in my role at my job I am given positive feedback . . . I am a leader . . . I’m on a good path toward constant growth.”

**Nailah.** A Black woman, age 28, Nailah immigrated with her family from Africa to the United States when she was seven years old. The oldest of four children, she grew up in a two-parent household with her mother, father, and siblings in a middle-class family. Neither parent attained an undergraduate degree although her mother has taken some college courses. Her mother is an accountant, and her father is an entrepreneur with his own car service business. Before arriving in the United States, Nailah completed some primary schooling in Europe where her family resided during their initial departure from Africa, eventually settling in a metropolitan suburb of a large city in the Mid-Atlantic states where she attended and graduated from a top-ranked public high school.

Nailah was encouraged by her mother to stretch beyond her list of competitive colleges and aim for admissions to an elite college or university. Nailah recalled her mother stating, “You know, these are all great schools, but I think you can stretch yourself and apply for like a reach college. I know your grades. I know how hard you work and what you’re capable of.” At first intimidated, Nailah applied to an elite private, non-profit university and other selective institutions. She was accepted to the elite university with a near full scholarship. She completed a dual degree program, earning both bachelor’s and master’s degrees in four years. She graduated from college in 2011 with both degrees.
After graduating, Nailah first worked in investment banking at a prestigious Fortune 100 company and later moved to another financial services firm. After three years on Wall Street and ready for a career switch, Nailah enrolled in graduate school where she received a master’s in business administration. At the time of this study, Nailah had embarked on a new phase of her post-college career. She switched into the personal care industry where she now holds a senior leadership position.

**Nando.** A 23-year-old Hispanic man and the son of immigrant parents from South America, Nando was born and raised in one of the boroughs in New York City. He and his sister grew up in a low-income, two-parent family. His mother worked “odd jobs here and there, babysitting, working in the factory, stuff along those lines” and his father worked as a taxi driver. Both of his parents only completed high school and struggled to communicate in English. Nando described his household as a “pretty loving home” and “working class family.” Encouraged by his parents to do well academically, he excelled at his public high school and earned a full scholarship to a selective public university where he was accepted into the honors program.

In 2015, Nando graduated with a bachelor’s degree and transitioned directly to a position in finance at a Fortune 100 multisector conglomerate company. He entered the company in a rotational leadership program as an analyst and subsequently advanced to his current role of associate. Looking back on the lifelong skills he gained during his career, Nando noted:

One, I would say, realizing that I had a lot of potential that I wasn’t tapping into. Two, just understanding that, I feel like, with going into a different company, with going into a different city, there’s going to be different cultures…be culturally aware of what you’re putting yourself into and…see how you fit in and…figure out how to best succeed…Putting in the work for preparation…Those are the biggest pieces. Instilling the necessary behaviors to ensure success.
**Pedro.** A 23-year-old Hispanic man, Pedro was born and raised in a culturally diverse neighborhood in one of the five New York City boroughs. Born of immigrant parents, his mother was from Central America and his father (who was not actively in his life) was from a different country in Central America. Pedro grew up in a low-income, single-parent household where his mother was a house cleaner during the early years of his life. At the age of 14, Pedro began to work to help support his mother and himself. His mother was unable to continue working due to personal issues and language barriers. Pedro, an academically strong student, was accepted into a top specialized public high school and graduated with honors, receiving a scholarship to an elite private nonprofit university.

In 2016, Pedro attained a bachelor’s degree and transitioned from college to a position as a credit analyst at a Fortune 500 company where he continues to progress.

When asked to reflect on his accomplishments, Pedro shared:

I still want to keep reaching for the stars and keep progressing. I think for me, the definition of success is paving the way for others, and so given that definition, I have not reached success yet. But I would say I have reached success given the context of my background and what I had to do for myself and, also the fact that I’m helping my mom out significantly. I’m successful in that sense.

Pedro proudly continued, “She [his mom] hasn’t worked since. We lived off our savings, learned to be extremely frugal and realistic, managing our budgets.”

**Ricardo.** A Hispanic man, age 24, Ricardo was born in South America but immigrated to the United States at the age of eight with his mother and two siblings after the death of his father. After moving around for a few years, his mother settled into a small town in a Northern state and later remarried. Although they lived in an upper middle-class community, the blended family of seven—five children and two parents—
was a working-class household where his mother cleaned houses and the step-father was a chef. Ricardo attended a public high school and pursued an undergraduate degree after graduating. He always planned to attend college, saying, “She [his mother] made it clear that we had a lot more opportunity than we could in [South America], and going to college was really the only option to complete the opportunity.”

In 2016, Ricardo graduated with a bachelor’s degree from a selective public university. Afterwards, he transitioned directly to an analyst position at a Fortune 500 company. He has since expanded his responsibilities to include assignments in other units of the business. Ricardo offered the advice of networking as a critical force that facilitated his career success. He said, “I think the network is probably the top thing. Networking and building out connections and keeping those connections.”

Sofía. A 31-year-old Black Hispanic woman, Sofía grew-up in a major city in a Northeastern region in the United States in a two-parent home with two siblings. Born and raised in the United States, her parents immigrated from a Central American country and worked blue-collar jobs in a warehouse (father) and food and beverage company (mother). Excelling in school at a young age, she was awarded a scholarship to attend a private boarding school in a Northeastern state that prepared students for college. She graduated from the boarding school after attending four years. Sofía was awarded a scholarship to an elite private, nonprofit university.

In 2008, Sofía received her bachelor’s degree and transitioned from college to career during the 2008 meltdown of the financial markets. Using her ingenuity and networking skills, she persevered until she landed a position as a sales assistant at a major mass communication company after attaining her bachelor’s degree. Sofía progressed on
her career path, changing companies several times, and eventually joining a charter school as a recruitment manager. She discovered that she likes recruitment and plans to pursue a career in human resource (HR) by conducting informational interviews and researching the HR profession. Sofía is also contemplating graduate school. One of the contributing forces to her success, she believed, was networking. Sofía shared:

So, all of those networks and relationships that I’ve built have been huge in my success. Because if you look through my résumé, a lot of those jobs that I’ve landed have been through some sort of contact…As long as I remember, that’s something that I’ve always done is like seeking people who can help me and really learning from them, and then having them really shape what I do next, whether it’s academically or career-wise.

Tomás. A 25-year-old Hispanic man, Tomás was born and raised in a low-income household in a metropolitan area in a Northeastern state. His parents immigrated to the United States from countries in Central America and South America. His parents worked blue-collar jobs as a library clerk (mother) and security guard (father). For most of his youth, his mother raised Tomás, an only child, alone as a single parent because his father was intermittently in and out of the home. Encouraged to take academics seriously by his parents and community, he attended and graduated from the local public high school. Afterwards, he received a full scholarship to attend a selective public university where he was accepted into the honors program.

In 2015, Tomás graduated with a bachelor’s degree in finance, receiving an honors distinction award. After college, Tomás founded his own real estate company where he is an entrepreneur and strategic advisor offering investment, finance and real estate advise to clients. When asked to share life and career lessons he has learned, Tomás responded:
Yeah, thrive, that is key . . . I had a mentor before I even cared about finance, before I even knew anything about David Rubenstein. Jay Z was my mentor. Not his person, but through his lyrics. And a *Reasonable Doubt*, which is one of the most influential pieces of music that has ever influenced me. He said it beautifully, “Nine-to-five, it’s how you survive.” I’m not trying to survive. I’m trying to live it to the limit and love it a lot . . . If he can come from what he came from and now shake hands with President Obama at the Forty-Forty club, anything is possible.

**Victoria.** A 23-year-old Black Hispanic woman from one of the five boroughs in New York City, Victoria grew up with both parents until they separated when she was a preteen. Although her mother became the primary caretaker of their low-income household, her father remained engaged in Victoria’s life. Her parents, immigrants from Central America, worked blue-collar jobs as a home attendant (mother) and dinner host at a hotel (father). After graduating from an all-girls’ Catholic high school, she enrolled in college, fulfilling the expectation to attend college that she and her family had of her.

Victoria was awarded a scholarship to an elite private, nonprofit university where she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in 2016. After graduation, she joined a Fortune 500 personal care and beauty company where she works in a global marketing position.

In response to my inquiry about a top job search strategy that led to the job she currently holds, Victoria responded, “Networking.” She explained:

I basically met a recruiter . . . and we exchanged contact information, we stayed in touch, and then when there was a job opening she reached out to me saying, “I was thinking of you, I know that you were looking, let me know if you are interested in this.” And then I started interviewing and then I got the job.

**Ziyad.** A Black man, 23 years of age, Ziyad was born in Africa and immigrated with his family to the United States at the age of five. The youngest of five siblings, he was raised in a metropolitan area in a Mid-Atlantic state on the outskirts of the nation’s capital in a two-parent, low-income household where his mother, a cashier, and father, a
certified nursing assistant, encouraged their children to attain higher education degrees in “America . . . the land of opportunity.” He also received encouragement and guidance from his sisters who had already completed bachelor’s degrees. Ziyad attended the local public high school and graduated with a nationally awarded, full scholarship which enabled him to attend a selective public university from which he graduated in 2016.

Ziyad transitioned directly from college to a position in finance, working as an investment banking analyst for a Fortune 100 company and gaining valuable experience to advance his career. Even though he attained his coveted position on Wall Street, Ziyad shared the internal conflict he attributed to his first-generation college graduate status. He stated,

There was a time where I just hit a wall. I just felt alone. I felt like I did not belong here. I sort of went into what I call a [dark] place, where I would think and try to go to church, try to find a way out.

Reflecting on the lessons learned from his challenging experiences, Ziyad noted the importance of building relationships and being prepared, two actions that he asserted facilitated his ability to advance his career and break through the “walls” that will inevitably be faced transitioning from college to career and beyond.
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