



## **Social Integration and Academic Persistence of First-Generation African American Female College Students at PWIs**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**For First-Generation African American Female College Students (FGAMFCS) to continue in their education, they need to feel included into the institutions' social structure. However, there is only limited research specifically exploring this dynamic. Social isolation, lack of support, and exclusionary campus environments hinder FGAMFCS' ability to thrive academically. This study investigates social integration and its influence on the persistence of FGAMFCS at public Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in the United States. Using Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model, the study conducted in-depth interviews with 15 conveniently selected sophomore FGAMFCS at a public PWI. Thematic analysis revealed that strong peer networks and meaningful faculty connections bolster resilience and a sense of belonging among FGAMFCS. However, many participants identified institutional barriers, such as limited culturally relevant support groups, that exacerbate feelings of social exclusion and isolation. The findings underscore the importance of developing inclusive social programs and support services that address the unique needs of FGAMFCS at PWIs. By enhancing social integration pathways, PWIs can support the success of FGAMFCS and contribute to a more equitable higher education environment.**

**Keywords:** Social integration, FGAMFCS, Student persistence, Predominantly White Institutions, Supportive peer relationships, Faculty mentorship.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the years, the roles that African American women have played in advocating for improved access to college education for themselves and future generations have been outstanding. This legacy dates back to Myrtilla Miner's 1851 efforts in the establishment of the Normal School for Colored Girls in Washington, D.C. to offer education to African American women (Perkins, 2015). Similarly, Mary Jane Patterson defined the existing norms to earn a college degree as the pioneer African American in the United States from Oberlin College (Jones-DeWeever, 2014; Baumgartner, 2017). Other African American women also attended Northern women's seminaries such as the Seven Sisters Colleges, which paralleled the Ivy League for men (Perkins, 2015). These early efforts laid a foundation for educational attainment, and by 2010, more than 66% of all college degrees conferred to African Americans were held by African American women (Jones-DeWeever, 2014). Despite these academic accomplishments, First-Generation

African American Female College Students (FGAMFCS) face significantly lower graduation rates at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) compared to their peers from other ethnic communities (Hanson, 2021).

FGAMFCS contend with unique, intersecting challenges related to race, gender, and socioeconomic status that impact their academic persistence. Although FGAMFCS enrolment increased by 5% between 2010 and 2020, only 40% of African American women at PWIs completed their degrees within the four-year period. This rate was lower than that of their Latina (56%) and White (70%) female counterparts (Hanson, 2021). The factors influencing FGAMFCS persistence are multifaceted and span financial burdens, limited advising, and a lack of familial support, which often hinder their ability to navigate college life successfully (Dennon, 2022; Matthews et al., 2022; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Moreover, FGAMFCS face barriers that intensify within the environment of PWIs, where they may encounter racial biases and cultural alienation (Gray et al., 2018; Inkelas et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2021). Moreover, the experiences of FGAMFCS in PWIs highlight feelings of cultural dissonance and exclusion. Most First-Generation College Students (FGCS), especially those from minority backgrounds, report struggles in adjusting to the predominantly white campus culture (Hines et al., 2015). Studies show that FGAMFCS often lack knowledge about college admissions, campus culture, and available resources (Inkelas et al., 2007; Tabrizi, 2020). Due to these challenges, a substantial portion of FGCS, including FGAMFCS, leave college prematurely, with about 33% dropping out within three years, compared to 14% among students from college-educated families (Education Advisory Board [EAB], 2018).

According to Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model (SIM), social integration is essential for academic persistence. For FGAMFCS, achieving social integration may provide the emotional and academic support necessary to mitigate the distinct challenges they face at PWIs. Although existing research has explored the general importance of social integration in promoting student success, there remains a gap in understanding how peer support networks, faculty mentorship, and inclusive campus practices impact FGAMFCS persistence (Dika & D'Amico, 2016; Hall, 2017). This study fills this gap by assessing how social integration drives the academic persistence of FGAMFCS in higher education. By examining social integration experiences of FGAMFCS, this study underscores the potential of targeted support structures and inclusive practices to enhance FGAMFCS commitment to their educational goals. The findings of the study hold significant implications for PWI administrators and policymakers, as they provide evidence-based insights to improve social integration initiatives tailored to FGAMFCS. This study contributes to deeper insights that will guide institutions in developing interventions that can effectively support FGAMFCS persistence and improve their social outcomes in higher education.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Social Integration and Student Persistence**

Social integration is one of the cardinal elements under Tinto's SIM that drives the persistence of students in academic settings. It relates to the extent to which students feel connected to and supported by their college community in the course of their studies (Tinto, 1993). The central aspects of social integration in college include positive relations with faculty and staff, taking part in student-led organizations, and the presence of supportive peer networks (Swecker et al., 2013; Parks-Yancy, 2012). According to Wolf et al. (2017), social belonging interventions

are the central drivers of academic success of FGCS, especially those from ethnic minorities. For FGAMFCS to remain committed to their college education, they have to benefit from targeted programs that foster social integration. Faculty members who actively support and mentor FGAMFCS can significantly enhance their academic success. As reported by Parks-Yancy (2012), supportive faculty engagements are often the cornerstone of persistence for first-generation minority students. Furthermore, Battaglia (2022) discovered that social connections with faculty not only boost FGCS determination to succeed academically but also provide critical emotional support that can mitigate feelings of isolation. Similarly, peer networks and campus resources are integral to FGAMFCS persistence. Strong peer connections provide emotional and academic support, enabling FGAMFCS to cope with the demands of college life. According to Swecker et al. (2013), many FGAMFCS experience isolation and financial stress due to reliance on student loans, which can create significant barriers to persistence. Institutional support systems such as counseling, and financial aid services have been shown to positively impact persistence, particularly for students with no other support systems (Swecker et al., 2013). Interventions aimed at enhancing peer support systems are crucial in promoting inclusivity and meet the needs of FGAMFCS. There is still insufficient research focus on the experiences of FGAMFCS at public PWIs.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs Tinto's (1993) SIM to examine how social integration impacts FGAMFCS persistence at PWIs. Tinto identified three influences predisposing students to persist in higher education. They include background, precollege educational experience, and personal characteristics. The model underscores the importance of aligning student expectations with institutional mission and providing accessible support services at personal, academic, and social levels (Powell et al., 2013). While Tinto's model acknowledges pre-entry traits like socioeconomic background and personal characteristics, this study focuses on the in-college experiences of FGAMFCS, specifically their social and academic integration. The model's emphasis on social integration helps to explore how supportive social networks and inclusive campus environments influence the persistence of FGAMFCS. Furthermore, Tinto's concept of academic integration, which encompasses active participation in academic activities and utilization of support services, is critical in understanding how these factors impact FGAMFCS persistence in higher education (Astin, 2014). By addressing institutional attributes such as the availability of support services and campus climate, the model helps in exploring the persistence of FGAMFCS and stresses the importance of tailored resources that meet their specific needs.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design and Sample**

Using a qualitative research design, the study was carried out at a public PWI in the US. For purposes of this study, the PWI was given the pseudonym Heartland College. Established in 1911, the PWI admitted a total of 5,992 students in the academic year 2022–2023 with 46.1% of these students being African American and 1,998 being African American females. The sample consisted of 15 FGAMFCS with at least two years of experience at Heartland College. These participants were selected through convenience sampling to obtain their detailed perspectives. Participants chosen needed to be African American and assigned female at birth, identified as FGCS, and have attended the college for two consecutive years. This focus on sophomore students allowed for a richer understanding of their navigation of the campus

environment. Each participant was allocated a pseudonym to ensure their confidentiality as required by IRB protocols. Out of the 15 participants, six aged between 20 and 25 years, five were aged between 30 and 40 years, one was 48 years, two were between 50 and 60 years, and one was 62 years. Annual household income varied, with most of the participants (nine) indicating household earnings ranging between \$40,000 and \$60,000 and three indicating family annual incomes ranging between \$20,000 and \$40,000 during the previous year. The participant majors ranged from nursing, pre-dental hygiene, visual arts, child development, social work, pre-medical, pre-nursing, to business management technology.

### **Data Collection**

In-depth interviews were used to collect the data from the participants. The interviews were conducted through the zoom platform, were recorded with the participants' consent, and they lasted between 60–90 minutes. The interviews followed an open-ended format to allow participants share detailed accounts of their experiences. The interview guide included questions that explored the influence of social integration on the persistence of FGAMFCS. The topics of discussion included student interactions, personal relationships, club involvement, leadership roles, sense of belonging, and any challenges faced in forming connections on campus. The data collected were kept securely for use in the later analysis stage.

### **Data Analysis**

The thematic analysis process by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used in analyzing the collected data. The process began with transcribing the interviews to develop a written account of the verbal data. The transcriptions were then reviewed by participants through a member-checking process to ensure accuracy before analysis. The thematic analysis involved several stages that included familiarization with the data, initial coding, axial coding to merge similar codes, and developing themes. The data were read repeatedly to identify relevant themes, which were subsequently cross-referenced with participant responses to establish coherence and validity in the findings. Independent verification of coding was also conducted to enhance reliability.

## **RESULTS**

From the data analysis, the student level of social integration appeared to have an impact on persistence in higher education. Supportive peer relationships, involvement in clubs and organizations, and the ability to overcome challenges in building social connections emerged as the central non-cognitive factors that influence the persistence and overall experience of FGAMFCS.

### **Supportive Peer Relationships and Sense of Belonging**

There was a unanimous perception that social integration created a supportive environment that encouraged them to persist in studies despite challenges. They stressed how forming close bonds with peers provided both emotional and academic support that contributed to their academic persistence. One participant, Jessica, described how building relationships helped students feel supported. She developed personal relationships by participating in class activities, facilitated by supportive teachers. Jessica said,

I did communicate with other students outside of school. By building a sense of belonging, I created a safe space where I could receive support and resources from

others, and I could also offer my help. We were able to build relationships from peers, and communicated in class outside of class from time to time.

Forming close relationships with peers led to a supportive network that extended beyond the classroom. By engaging with classmates, participants were able to cultivate a community where mutual support was readily available. This sense of belonging provided the resources to help students persist in studies and allowed them to offer assistance to others.

Another participant, Aaliyah, highlighted the essence of social groups and study sessions in promoting a sense of community. The role that Aaliyah played as a mentor among peers, where she was referred to as "the grandma of the group," underscored the impact of peer relationships on college persistence. When explaining about interactions with other learners, Aaliyah said,

Social integration was very important for me because I'm a social human. I need human interaction. Socializing with other individuals was very important. As far as being popular around our peers, I would say, I am. They call me the grandma of the group because I'm kind of the one with the word of wisdom that most need from time to time. Like when we go out, I make sure that everybody gets home safe and stuff like that, or I like to host the parties. Being in classes with those individuals most of the time, like when we set up study groups, we found community in that we didn't know that we had. Most of the time, you only associate with people, or you start talking to people because you're in those classes, and we built relationships on top of that. So, when we got out of classes, it was easy for us to hang out in the student union or go to Starbucks and have a study group or go have a study dinner when everybody was off.

The nickname "grandma of the group" illustrated how her wisdom and social skills contributed to the formation of a supportive community. The study groups and social activities she participated in facilitated academic collaboration and nurtured her belongingness. These interactions provided a network of peers who shared similar goals, enhancing college experience and persistence.

Sarah found being open about her age helped form connections, despite initial feelings of seclusion due to age differences. While describing how she was able to develop relationships with others, Sarah stated,

When I first came to one of my classes, I was the oldest person there, but the other students didn't know it. Everyone was talking about their age and children, and I mentioned that I was 38. They looked around in disbelief and asked to see my ID to prove it. I told them I had four kids, and they were astonished because I didn't look my age. This amazement led them to communicate with me openly. They didn't show any favoritism, and we just interacted naturally.

Willingness to share personal information led to open communication and natural interactions with peers. This openness helped bridge the gap between different age groups. The story illustrated that intergenerational interactions can enhance social integration, leading to persistence.

Participants underscored the importance of intergenerational and cross-demographic interaction among peers in supporting social integration and persistence in college. This

interaction helped bridge the gap between students of different ages and backgrounds. Destiny said,

I would say the younger generation was like my parents. They were not in my age group. I remember doing an assignment where the group had to select a topic for a presentation. The younger ladies in the group chose Taylor Swift. I'm 58 and knew nothing about Taylor Swift, but these young ladies were so informed and they pulled me in. I enjoyed working with them. I had never done anything like that before. I didn't know much about Taylor Swift, but by the end of the studies and working with these ladies, I felt like part of the group. Yes, we would meet together for coffee and plan our presentation, so that was a good experience working with the young ladies.

These experiences stressed the importance of cross-demographic interactions in fostering belongingness. Working with younger students on a presentation about Taylor Swift illustrated how engaging in shared academic tasks bridged generational gaps. Despite initial unfamiliarity with the topic, Destiny was able to integrate into the group and feel a belongingness. Interaction with peers not only enhanced participants academic experience but also provided a supportive network, demonstrating that diverse peer relationships impact persistence in higher education. Feelings of belongingness within the college environment promote the persistence of FGAMFCS. Feeling accepted and valued by peers and faculty contributed to overall satisfaction and commitment to academic goals. This sense of inclusion provided the confidence and motivation needed to persevere through challenges. Olivia highlighted how college experience transformed her into a more social and people-oriented person. When commenting about how feelings of attachment in college affects her sense of belonging, Olivia said that "It affects my overall college experience because I am now more of a people person and very social. Experiencing life on campus and feeling included has significantly influenced me."

This illustrated the transformative impact of a supportive social environment on personal development and persistence. The experience of feeling included and welcomed on campus led to students becoming more social and people-oriented. By feeling included, Olivia was able to build a supportive network that provided the confidence and motivation needed to persist through challenges. It underscored the role of a welcoming environment in promoting social integration and persistence among FGAMFCS students.

Samantha shared how she developed close relationships and strong peer bonds through academic collaboration. Working together with classmates on challenging subjects like anatomy led to the creation of a supportive community. She said,

I developed personal relationships with classmates. For example, I met X and Y in anatomy class. We formed a small community to help each other get through anatomy. Our bond was so close that we still communicate and support each other outside of class.

The sentiment emphasized the importance of forming strong peer bonds through academic collaboration. Her experience in anatomy class, where students created a small community to support each other, illustrated how working together on challenging coursework can lead to lasting relationships. These bonds extended beyond the classroom, providing a support network that persisted even after the course ended. For FGAMFCS students, such relationships are vital as they offer both academic and emotional support.

### **Participation in Campus Clubs and Organizations**

It emerged from the interviews that involvement in clubs and organizations provided a structured environment for social integration for FGAMFCS. Engagement in extracurricular activities not only enhanced student college experiences but also reinforced their commitment to academic goals. These activities helped participants build networks, develop leadership skills, and stay motivated to achieve academic success. Aaliyah participation in the yearbook club exemplified the benefits of such involvement. She described her experience as "really, really fun," noting that it facilitated socialization and provided a sense of college life. When talking about involvement in clubs and organizations in college, Aaliyah said,

Yearbook on campus is really, really fun. It helped again with socialization. We had to cover soccer and football games. Homecoming was extremely fun.... So being able to go to those events really helped me get the college experience, so to speak. Especially when we had tailgating days during homecoming on the main campus in Jackson. I was able to take pictures and come back and edit them and be a part of a team with other students. And that was really, really fun.

The yearbook club provided participants with opportunities to engage in campus life, which was particularly valuable as commuter students. By participating in events like soccer and football games, and homecoming, they were able to integrate more deeply into the campus community. This not only facilitated socialization but also offered a taste of the traditional college experience. Roles in the club, which included taking and editing photos, gave a sense of responsibility and teamwork, further enhanced commitment of study participants to academic and social goals.

Jasmine shared how being affiliated to Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) International Honor Society gave a sense of purpose and community, positively impacting academic performance and social integration. She said,

PTK meets once a month. We work on service projects for the community, volunteer in the community to give back, we do can food drives to give to families in need, and a clothes drive. It helped me to stay focused and continue to work hard to continue making good grades. I feel supported.

Involvement with Phi Theta Kappa International Honor Society provided study participants with a supportive community and a sense of purpose. The honor society emphasis on community service and academic excellence helped students stay focused and motivated. The monthly meetings and various service projects not only allowed them to give back to the community but also reinforced commitment to maintaining good grades. The sense of support felt from PTK promoted the social integration and academic persistence of participants.

Destiny, who participated in the Social Science Club, highlighted how community outreach activities, such as visiting nursing homes and feeding the homeless, fostered purpose. She expressed joy in community service activities, which enhanced college experience. She noted how participating in the Social Science Club allowed her to connect with others and contribute to the community. She said,

We visit the nursing home because that's going to be one of our next projects to go into the nursing home and bring these elderly patients goodie bags and play games with them. I love doing that with these group of ladies that I met in the class.

Participants engagement in the Social Science Club illustrated the positive impact of community service on college experience. The club outreach activities, such as visiting nursing homes, provided meaningful interactions and a sense of belonging.

Simone shared her involvement with the Associates Degree Nursing organization, describing how participating in public health activities during the first semester broadened her perspective. Participation in the ADN Nursing organization provided her with practical experience and a broader perspective on life. She said,

When the first semester came around, they did a public health event, where they also hosted a career fair. We took blood pressures and stuff like that. It made me view life a little differently. Dealing with the patients, hands-on, and seeing how they are living. It kind of opened my eyes more to wanting to be a nurse.

Engaging in public health activities and career fairs allowed participants to engage in real-world contexts and enhance their educational experience. Hands-on involvement also promoted community engagement and a sense of purpose, illustrating the value of professional organizations in enriching understanding of their fields of study and motivating academic pursuits.

Madeline acknowledgment of the motivation derived from academic expectations highlighted the role of program standards and expectations in driving student persistence. When explaining how involvement in college organizations impacted academic performance, Madeline said,

It made me more motivated to complete nursing because you have to have good grades to move on to the next semester. The program's academic expectations were clear, and I knew that maintaining good grades was not just a requirement but a necessity for my progression. This knowledge served as a constant reminder of the importance of staying focused and dedicated to my studies. Despite the challenges I faced, knowing that my academic performance directly impacted my ability to continue in the program motivated me to strive for excellence in every aspect of my education.

The recognition of the academic expectations set by the nursing program highlighted how institutional standards can motivate students to persist in their studies. The acknowledgment that good grades are required to progress in college programs indicated that academic requirements motivated FGAMFCS to strive for academic excellence. The experience underscored the importance of clear academic goals and expectations in supporting FGAMFCS persistence in higher education.

### **Overcoming Challenges in Building Social Connections**

Participants had to overcome various social barriers to integrate socially and persist academically. Age differences, cultural barriers, and initial feelings of isolation hindered their integration. Brianna discussed the difficulty older students faced in feeling included within the college social environment. She noted the lack of social events for older students, which made it difficult for her to feel included. She said,

I do not feel a sense of belonging and inclusion within my college's social environment. The main reason is that there aren't many social events specifically for women my age. How can we get together and support each other if we do not know each other and our



struggles? Many of us are dealing with similar challenges, but there is no platform for us to connect. We need support groups and meetings to reassure us that we're not alone in feeling this way. Simple gatherings, like coffee and tea meet-ups, could provide an opportunity for conversation and connection.

Brianna described the absence of social events tailored for older students, leading to feeling exclusion from the college social environment. In her view, support groups and regular meetings help non-traditional students connect and support one another. Simple gatherings, such as coffee and tea meet-ups, could cultivate opportunities for conversation and connection, helping to build attachment and inclusion among older students.

Sarah described experiences with racial and age-related segregation in classes. She observed that students often self-segregated by race, leading to a divided classroom environment. When asked whether there were any specific challenges that faced in building social connections with her peers or finding a community of support, Sarah said,

Yes. I felt secluded in one of my classes because students of different races tend to stick together and not interact much with other races. One race sits on one side of the room, and the other race on the other side, creating a division. I feel very secluded because I get along with everybody and want everyone to communicate to make things easier for the class as a whole.

Participants of different races tended to group together, leading to a divided classroom environment. Despite the desire to foster inclusive communication among all, the segregation created a sense of seclusion for Sarah. The experience underscored the need for efforts to promote inclusivity and interaction across diverse student groups to bridge social divides and nurture a more cohesive learning environment.

Rachel discussed how her reserved nature made it difficult to initiate interactions with peers. Despite this, she made efforts to communicate with those she knew. Rachel highlighted the role of modern communication tools in maintaining these connections. When asked to talk about interactions with other students, whether she was well-liked by her colleagues in class, and whether she communicated with other students after school, Rachel stated,

No, not really. I'm more to myself, but if I know someone, I'll talk to them. I'll try to talk to them. I also communicate with some students after school. Some have my phone number, and some have my Snapchat.

The reserved nature of Rachel posed challenges in initiating interactions with peers. Although she made efforts to communicate with those she knew, her introverted personality made it difficult to build new social connections. Rachel use of modern communication tools such as Snapchat with some peers indicated willingness to connect, despite natural inclination to keep to herself. This demonstrated the significance of creating opportunities for interaction that can accommodate different personality types and help reserved students gradually build their social networks.

Jessica recounted experiencing social rejection and the strategies she used to become more socially integrated with classmates. Despite feeling brushed off by some peers, she focused on

maintaining established relationships. Resilience helped her navigate these social challenges. She stated,

There were some challenges in building social connections with my peers. However, if I felt brushed off by someone, I would move on and not stress about it because I had already established some relationships with other peers. It can be upsetting, especially when you have pure intentions. Simple questions, like asking for directions to a building or for help with something, might be ignored or brushed off. You notice how they communicate with others outside your circle, and it can be disheartening.

Participants faced difficulties in building social connections, often experiencing rejection or being brushed off by peers. Despite these challenges, they chose to focus on the relationships already established, maintaining a positive outlook. The approach highlighted the importance of resilience and not letting negative experiences deter them from seeking new relationships with peers. The emotional impact of being ignored was evident, yet the strategy of moving on demonstrated determination to overcome social obstacles, emphasizing the value of focusing on positive interactions and established relationships.

Madeline described her struggle to connect with a large class due to her preference for smaller social circles. The class size was initially overwhelming for her. However, structured group activities helped her build connections. She said,

It took me a while to get used to everybody because the class was so big. I'm not a 'talk-to-you' type of person. I'm more of a small-circle type of person. It was overwhelming at first, but they put us in groups all the time, so you had no other choice but to get to know other people.

The overwhelming size of the class made it challenging for Madeline to engage with others. However, the use of structured group activities facilitated her social integration, forcing her to interact with classmates. This approach helped Madeline gradually build connections, demonstrating the effectiveness of group work in overcoming social barriers for more reserved students. The experience emphasized how structured activities can help students who are less outgoing form necessary social connections

## **DISCUSSION**

The study examined how social integration impacts the persistence of persistence of FGAMFCS. The study showed the importance of supportive peer interactions in fostering belongingness and persistence among FGAMFCS. This finding aligns with those of Battaglia (2022), which emphasized how social connections positively affect the determination to attain academic success among FGAMFCS. The narratives from participants underscored how developing close bonds with classmates and peers provides both emotional and academic support contributing significantly to persistence. This echoes the results of Wolf et al. (2017), who emphasized the correlation between social integration and college persistence among ethnic minority undergraduates. Involvement in clubs and organizations provided a structured environment for social integration and personal development. It was evident from the findings that involvement in campus clubs and organizations enhanced social integration and personal development. This finding aligns with those of Astin (2014), Harper (2013) and Battaglia (2022), which highlighted how engagement in extracurricular activities reinforces student commitment to academic goals and enhances college experiences. Similarly, Wolf et al. (2017)

emphasized the importance of intervention programs in promoting social integration and improving academic performances among minority student groups. The narratives demonstrated how participation in extracurricular activities contributed to feelings of belongingness and motivation among FGAMFCS.

Belongingness and inclusivity in college emerged as essential for the persistence of FGAMFCS. According to Astin (2014), institutions can enhance student involvement and inclusion by improving the campus environment, increasing faculty-student interaction, and offering support through activities and services that keep students engaged. Feeling accepted and valued by peers and faculty contributed to overall satisfaction and commitment to academic goals. This is in alignment with Tinto's (1993) assertion that academic and social assimilation enhances the success of underrepresented student groups, compensating for any deficits. The emphasis on feeling accepted and valued by peers and faculty resonates with previous research by Powell et al. (2013). These researchers highlighted easily accessible support and inclusive services promote student persistence.

Despite the positive aspects of social integration, FGAMFCS also face challenges in creating and sustaining social connections. Age differences, cultural obstacles, and feelings of isolation all impede the social integration process. This finding similar to the revelation by Swecker et al. (2013) that isolation and difficulties hinder social integration for FGCS. The barriers related to age differences, cultural differences, and racial segregation resonate with the observations of Powell et al. (2013) regarding the need to address structural inequities and promote college inclusivity.

Due to the design of this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small, as only 15 participants were selected conveniently and interviewed. While qualitative research often employs small samples to facilitate in-depth exploration (Creswell et al., 2007), this practice limits the broader applicability of the results. To mitigate this limitation, participants were specifically selected based on their status as FGAMFCS who had attended PWIs for at least two consecutive years. A representative from the office of the registrar served as the study gatekeeper to ensure that only appropriate participants were included. Secondly, the study relied on qualitative data gathered from one PWI, which may not capture diverse experiences of FGAMFCS across different institutions, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Lastly, while the qualitative data provided rich insights, the study did not incorporate quantitative measures. Thus, it was not possible to understand the correlations between specific interventions and academic persistence among FGAMFCS.

## CONCLUSION

The study utilized a qualitative design to examine the persistence of FGAMFCS at PWIs. The findings underscore the essence of tailored support systems, such as counseling services, peer mentoring, and faculty engagement, in enhancing the persistence rates of FGAMFCS. Critical elements identified include the role of supportive peer interactions, involvement in campus activities, and meaningful faculty-student interactions, all contributing to a heightened sense of belonging among FGAMFCS. Despite the challenges faced, participants who engaged in extracurricular activities reported greater satisfaction and commitment to their academic goals. While the study sheds light on a specific, under-researched demographic, it is limited by its small sample size and the singular context of one PWI. Future studies could include a more

diverse sample across multiple institutions to validate and broaden these insights. Investigating the experiences of FGAMFCS in varying institutional contexts could provide a richer understanding of the factors that affect their persistence in college. Furthermore, exploring the influence of institutional programs, policies, and practices on the experiences of FGAMFCS can inform the development of more effective support systems. Ultimately, this study contributes to the conversation on the challenges faced by FGAMFCS and emphasizes the need for ongoing attention to their unique experiences and support needs in higher education.

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