The Influence of Pre-entry Attributes Academic and Social Integration on Persistence and Academic Success Among First- Generation African American Lgbtq+ Students at Hbcus in the Southeastern United States

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Abstract: This qualitative study examined persistence and achievement of first-generation, Black LGBTQ+ students at HBCUs in the southeastern U.S. While HBCUs promote cultural affirmation, the intersectional experiences of these students remain underexplored. Guided by Tinto's Student Departure Theory, the study explored how pre-entry traits, academic, and social integration influence persistence through semi-structured interviews at two HBCUs. Thematic analysis found family, spirituality, and being first-generation shaped motivations and challenges. Academic integration relied on faculty relationships and institutional support, especially identity-affirming classrooms. Social factors like peer relationships, campus culture, and safe spaces impacted belonging. Many students made sacrifices to stay committed, often without support. Results highlight HBCUs' cultural affirmation but gaps in supporting LGBTQ+ and first-generation students. Recommendations include expanding affirming spaces, better faculty training on inclusion, and improved advising, mentorship, and counseling. Future research should examine long-term outcomes and how institutions can better serve diverse students.

Keywords: first-generation college students, African American students, LGBTQ+, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, student persistence, academic integration, social integration.

INTRODUCTION

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have been vital to the Black community since their inception, playing a key role in educating and empowering Black Americans (McNulty, 2023). They provide access to higher education for Black individuals often excluded from Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (McNulty, 2023). HBCUs aim to prepare Black students for the professional workforce (Albritton, 2012, p. 312). They have produced many successful alumni, such as Vice President Kamala Harris (Howard University), Stacy Abrams (Spelman College), Thurgood Marshall (Lincoln University), Oprah Winfrey (Tennessee State University), and Wandy Sykes (Hampton University), who have contributed to politics, STEM, and arts. One in six bachelor's degrees are from HBCUs, and 25% of African Americans earn an HBCU degree (Shuler et al., 2022). These institutions remain a symbol of hope for future Black generations (McNulty, 2025).

This study examined how first-generation LGBTQ+ students' pre-entry, social, and academic experiences on HBCU campuses affect their success. Social integration included involvement in student organizations, frequent communication with faculty and students,

and time spent on campus (Tinto, 1993). Academic integration involved engaging with coursework, understanding its relevance, and feeling supported by professors and peers. Tinto (1987) argued that students who integrate socially and academically are more likely to persist to graduation. This research explores how pre-entry traits and integration influence the academic success of first-generation Black LGBTQ+ students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK/LITERATURE REVIEW

Tinto's views on student departure and the interactive model explain how students engage with the academic environment and how their involvement affects their decision to stay or leave (Tinto, 1975, 1987). His integrative theory also examined student attrition, which is a progression starting from enrollment and continuing through their college years (Tinto, 1988, 1987). Tinto confirmed that students are more likely to stay and graduate if they are socially and academically integrated into the institution. Integration involves students' connection with classmates and teachers, as well as participation in college life both inside and outside the classroom (Tinto, 2005). In 2017, Tinto identified three factors influencing initial year integration: personal and psychological features, academic aspects (including teaching and counseling), and social and relational factors. Psychological qualities influence a student's decision to persist or withdraw (Tinto, 1975, 1987). Academic integration, such as counseling and curriculum alignment with goals, is vital for success (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Tinto emphasized that institutions should provide support to facilitate student transition, while social integration, involving engagement and belonging, strengthens student-institution relationships.

The African American LGBTQ+ community is a marginalized group needing special care, given their vulnerability. Racial minority status complicates their challenges (Coleman, 2016b). African American LGBTQ+ undergraduates face broader obstacles in education, with persistence influenced by factors like finances, family, culture, intersectionality, support, and campus climate (Strayhorn, 2018). First-generation LGBTQ+ students encounter unique socioeconomic barriers and cultural differences, leading to identity struggles and weaker family ties, impacting their personal and educational lives (Byrd, 2020).

Black students' experiences in higher education are shaped by intersecting factors like race, socioeconomic background, and systemic inequities, creating unique challenges and opportunities for understanding disparities. Research highlights barriers such as limited resources, discrimination, and systemic biases, while also emphasizing cultural assets that support success. Brown (2025) advocates for a critical view that recognizes students' strengths—values, resilience, and cultural knowledge—challenging deficit narratives and fostering inclusive, culturally responsive environments. Hu, Nix, and O'Shea (2025) argue that support models must evolve to reflect changing demographics, emphasizing emotional and social integration, especially for first-generation and minoritized students. Orbih (2025) promotes affective learning that affirms identity and promotes liberation rather than mere assimilation.

Moore (2025) discusses how microaggressions and underrepresentation impact Black students' participation and well-being at PWIs, compounded by structural inequities. Finzi-Smith (2025) finds that graduate students' sense of belonging is weakened when cultural identity is neglected. Systemic disparities start early, affecting educational opportunities,

as Woolcock (2025) notes disparities in access to AP courses for Black and Latinx students, which hinder college readiness and reinforce stereotypes. Howell (2025) links these inequities to broader issues, showing how punitive discipline disproportionately affects Black youth, diverting them from college pathways.

Various factors influence perseverance, including high school experiences, academic support, minority status, campus integration, and policies (Tinto, 1993). Karp et al. (2010) found classroom connections boost engagement and retention. Understanding whether these factors are positive or negative requires analyzing their individual impact. Reactions to challenges also shape resilience, as shown by Craig and Smith (2014), who linked supportive relationships and affirming environments to emotional safety in gay men. First-generation LGBTQ+ students often develop resilience from adversity (Alvarado et al., 2017). Generally, strong determination helps students graduate and pursue higher education (Maxwell, 2013). Tinto's (1993) Student Departure theory highlights social and academic engagement's role in success, though marginalized students face discrimination and exclusion (Tinto, 2024). These factors influence perseverance and retention, with first-generation students showing higher perseverance but also greater denial and stress, risking collapse without support (McBrien et al., 2022).

Tinto emphasized that relationships with faculty, staff, and peers are vital to persistence at HBCUs, especially for students from challenging backgrounds (McBrien et al., 2022). Without strong support, stress can hinder academic focus, increasing dropout risk (Coleman, 2016b). Tinto's framework advocates for formal and informal engagement to aid success and retention, considering characteristics like first-generation status, race, and orientation (Brinkley-Etzkorn & Cherry, 2020). Supporting these students socially and academically is essential for their future contributions. Although peer interactions are key to social inclusion (Craig & Smith, 2014), research often overlooks LGBTQ+ students' challenges, especially regarding race and first-generation status. Little is known about peer support's impact on the mental health and achievement of students at HBCUs, revealing a research gap.

Interpersonal relationships among peers in HBCUs are vital for social integration of first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students. These bonds foster emotional connections and a sense of belonging, which are crucial for engagement. Strayhorn (2018) shows that social belonging directly influences academic success, especially for minority students. LGBTQ+ students, belonging to both racial and sexual minorities, rely heavily on peer interactions. First-generation LGBTQ+ students form connections based on shared experiences and campus LGBTQ+ resources (Bowleg, 2017). Garvey et al. (2019) found that perceived LGBTQ+ inclusivity on campus correlates with better integration and belonging, though traditional cultural beliefs can create unwelcoming environments (Russell et al., 2021). Such barriers can lead to alienation and ostracism. LGBTQ+ student organizations support social bonds among students facing similar challenges, yet fear of discrimination often discourages participation, limiting friendship opportunities. Peer interactions significantly impact mental health, with strong networks reducing depression and anxiety (Mofatteh, 2020). Lack of support can cause social isolation, emotional distress, and poor academics. Race, sexual orientation, and first-generation status shape peer relationships (Bowleg, 2017). As a result, this study was grounded in a qualitative research design.

RATIONALE FOR METHODOLOGY

While valuable for trends, quantitative research may lack depth in exploring the personal experiences of first-generation Black LGBTQ+ students, as it relies on predefined variables and large samples that may not represent this small, diverse group (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Maxwell, 2013).

In contrast, qualitative methods, like interviews, enable rich, in-depth understanding of these students' unique perspectives, incorporating their narratives to reveal complex identity formation and challenges. This phenomenological approach provides nuanced insights into their lived experiences within social and academic environments, especially at HBCUs, capturing rich context and personal stories that quantitative methods might miss.

Assumptions/Biases

The researchers acted as the instrument in this qualitative study (Creswell, 2007), which involves potential bias from personal assumptions, beliefs, and values (Glesne, 2007). To maintain objectivity, the researchers documented memos and disclosed biases transparently. The study assumed participants provided valid insights and interpretations were accurate, influencing design and analysis. Recognizing inherent biases from cultural background and worldview was essential, with strategies like peer debriefing and member checking used to counteract subjective influences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Site Selection

Participants were undergraduate students and recent graduates from two HBCUs in the Southeastern US, both offering diverse programs and attracting Black students from various backgrounds. The study focused on understanding the academic success and social experiences of Black first-generation LGBTQ+ students at these schools.

The first site, Alpha University (AU), is known for its supportive, inclusive campus fostering community engagement—appealing for Black first-generation LGBTQ+ students seeking identity expression and academic achievement. Its diverse community provided a rich context for the research, along with resources like counseling, LGBTQ+ organizations, mentoring, and academic support.

The second site, Bravo University (BU), is characterized by its cultural heritage, community engagement, and inclusive initiatives supporting student well-being and diverse identities. Its campus promotes visibility for underrepresented voices and offers active community partnerships, making it ideal for exploring Black first-generation LGBTQ+ students' experiences.

Both institutions, located in the southeastern US, facilitate collaborations with local LGBTQ+ advocacy groups, broadening the research's scope.

Using these sites, the researchers examined how institutional commitments influence the success of Black first-generation LGBTQ+ students at HBCUs.

Sample Selection

This research examined the lived experiences of Black LGBTQ+ first-generation students at two HBCUs, with 15 participants or until data saturation. Participants identified as Black, LGBTQ+, first-generation, enrolled or recent graduates. Purposeful snowball sampling was used, selecting individuals fitting criteria: 1) Black, 2) LGBTQ+, 3) first-generation, 4) completing or recent graduates of the HBCUs. Recruitment involved contacting Deans of Students, campus visits, and social media outreach.

Data Collection Procedures

A qualitative approach was used for data collection, with the study's purpose explained in an invitation to potential participants. Once they confirmed interest, the researchers sent an electronic consent form and demographic questionnaire via university email. The questionnaire gathered background information to confirm eligibility. Participants could discuss questions about the consent form. To protect privacy, each was assigned a pseudonym, and the institution's identity remained confidential. Participants received the interview protocol by email to ask questions and clarify. The researchers conducted 60-90 minute semi-structured interviews via Zoom, asking permission to record.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Data analysis began promptly during data collection and continued throughout the research process (Maxwell, 2013). In-depth interviews involved uploading recordings to a password-protected Microsoft Word document for storage, and recordings were submitted to a third-party transcription service due to their length. The researchers used Otter.ai, which recorded, transcribed, and uploaded the interviews. After transcription, participants received transcripts for verification, allowing them to adjust or omit statements for confidentiality or clarity. The study aimed to evaluate how the data addressed the research questions, with emerging themes guiding the analysis and linking data, interview questions, and results.

Trustworthiness

To uphold credibility and minimize researcher bias, the researcher's used strategies like prolonged engagement, building rapport through interviews, and member-checking to verify interpretations with participants, reducing bias and increasing trustworthiness (Birt et al., 2016). In-depth interviews captured rich insights into students' experiences.

- Confirmability was ensured through peer debriefing, where colleagues reviewed the process, data, and interpretations to identify biases, supporting credible findings (Shenton, 2004).

- Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participants, and circumstances, allowing others to assess applicability to their settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

- Dependability was maintained via an audit trail documenting all research steps, enabling external review and ensuring consistency and reliability of findings (Shenton, 2004).

Descriptions of Participants

This study explored the experiences of first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students at two HBCUs in the Southeastern U.S., focusing on how pre-entry attributes and integration affected their persistence and success. Guided by Tinto's (1995) framework, 15 participants—seven males, four females, two nonbinary, and two transgender women—aged 19-22 with diverse majors and orientations, shared their stories. Nine were undergraduates, six graduates, with pseudonyms used for confidentiality. Table 1 summarizes demographics, including pseudonym, age, academic status, gender, sexual orientation, GPA, major, and university.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Information

Name	Age	Classification	Gender	Sexual Orientation	GPA	Major	University
Thompson	21	Junior	Male	Gay	3.5	Theater and Dance	University B
Carter	22	Graduate	Male	Gay	4.0	Business Administration	University B
Greene	22	Graduate	Female	Lesbian	3.8	Psychology	University B
Jackson	21	Junior	Male	Gay	3.5	Business Administration	University A
Ellis	22	Graduate	Male	Gay	3.8	Mass Communications	University B
Alexander	20	Junior	Female	Bisexual	3.0	Social Work	University B
Robinson	20	Sophomore	Male	Gay	2.5	Music Performance	University A
Wallace	22	Graduate	Nonbinary	Lesbian	3.2	Political Science	University B
Bryant	19	Sophomore	Male	Gay	3.7	Media Studies	University B
Foster	21	Senior	Female	Lesbian	4.0	Music Education	University B
Davis	22	Graduate	Transgender Woman	Straight	3.8	Sociology	University A
Harris	21	Junior	Female	Queer	2.7	English	University B
Freeman	22	Senior	Nonbinary	Gay	3.5	Computer Science	University A
Beaugard	21	Senior	Transgender Woman	Gay	3.7	Theater	University A
Moore	22	Graduate	Male	Bisexual	3.0	Business Administration	University B

FINDINGS

This study explored how academic and social integration affect persistence and success among first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students at two HBCUs in the Southeastern U.S., guided by Vincent Tinto's theory. Data came from interviews with 15 participants, conducted via Zoom, lasting 60-90 minutes. Participants were selected through snowball sampling to capture diverse experiences. The research focused on how campus experiences influenced their academic journeys. Key questions addressed the impact of pre-entry attributes, academic, and social integration on persistence and success. Transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, combining Tinto's framework with emerging themes like identity concealment and peer support.

This study was grounded in three research questions.

- How do pre-entry attributes influence the persistence and academic success of first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students at an HBCU?

- How do academic integration experiences influence the persistence and academic success of first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students at an HBCU?

- How do social integration factors influence the persistence and academic success of first- generation African American LGBTQ+ students at an HBCU?

> **Research Question 1: How do pre-entry attributes affect the persistence and success of first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students at an HBCU?**

Theme 1: First-Gen Pressure and Internal Motivation

Participants highlighted pressures from family expectations, cultural duties, and personal ambition, which fostered perseverance. For many, being first in their family was both a burden and pride, motivating academic success despite obstacles. Jackson felt driven to represent his community, stating, "I'm not just here for myself. I'm representing my community, my church, and my family... if I mess up, it reflects on more than just me." Robinson recalled his family emphasizing education as the way out of their neighborhood, and Carter felt a duty to fulfill his mother's dream, who never attended college. Wallace believed that as the first in their family, they had to succeed for others counting on them. These motivations were intertwined with sacrifices made by their mothers, who worked hard to support their education.

Davis shared pressure from family's struggles to attend college, which fueled their determination to graduate. Alexander wanted to help others reach college since his parents didn't finish. Participants felt their success extended beyond themselves to family members unfamiliar with college life. Greene described a strong sense of responsibility, sometimes stressful but motivating. Freeman remembered considering quitting but was inspired to persevere for his younger sister. Overall, pressure combined with purpose fueled their motivation, viewing their college journey as creating a legacy of education and opportunity for others.

Theme 2: Pre-College Silence and Identity Discovery

This theme explores LGBTQ+ identity discovery and belonging at a university. Among 15 participants, nine shared experiences of being closeted before college, then self-discovering and feeling comfortable. Participants grew up in diverse family environments, often hesitant to come out due to potential reactions, highlighting pre-entry barriers impacting persistence and success for first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students at an HBCU. Greene, from a small Southern town, recalled feeling different but lacking language or support and only discovering 'queer' terminology in college, which helped him feel more accepted. Such pre-entry fears and limited vocabulary influence educational experiences, but engagement in supportive environments fosters identity development and perseverance. Bryant, a gay sophomore, said college clubs helped him find safe spaces, while Moore, bisexual, shared how family remarks hindered his self-acceptance until he found others like him at Alpha University, which improved his self-view.

Theme 3: Family Influence

This research confirms that the family unit plays an essential role in shaping students' self-perception and world navigation, especially for LGBTQ+ and first-generation college students. Many grew up in environments of silence, shame, or rejection regarding sexuality and gender identity. Cultural norms and religious values often viewed queerness as incompatible with family expectations. These messages influenced students' higher education entry—some with emotional wounds, others with determination. Family dynamics were both distressing and motivating, shaping resilience.

Participants described living double lives—masking identities at home and exploring them in college. Some faced disownment or emotional withdrawal, while others found small supportive moments from siblings or extended family. Family influence was complex; it could wound, shape, or inspire. Navigating academics and family relationships remained a powerful ongoing challenge.

Thompson, a 21-year-old junior in Theater and Dance, was raised in a devout Southern household with strict gender roles. His mother linked morality and success to heterosexual marriage and church. He disclosed his sexuality to friends but remains closeted at home to preserve family image. He said, "My mom still calls it a 'phase' and prays for me to meet a 'nice woman,' but being around her feels like hiding and exhausting." His story reflects emotional struggles of maintaining dual identities.

Ellis, a 22-year-old gay Black man, was raised by a single father with military background. Internalized messages like "Big Boys don't cry" delayed his coming out. When he finally disclosed at 19, his father's response was unsupportive, weakening their bond. He recalled, "He said, 'I don't want anyone to know,'" which motivated him to fight harder to succeed and support himself, despite familial rejection. Ellis's perseverance exemplifies resistance to rejection and the complex impact of family expectations.

Theme 4: Spirituality as an Anchor

For many first-generation LGBTQ+ students at HBCUs, spirituality is a vital source of strength, resilience, and grounding, often rooted in church traditions, prayers, meditation,

and personal divine purpose. Faith helps them understand experiences and cope with discrimination, isolation, and identity struggles within faith communities. Some reinterpret religious teachings to support their identities, challenge traditional views, or forge personal spiritual paths outside mainstream religion, creating practices that reflect their experiences.

During loneliness, rejection, or uncertainty, spirituality offers clarity and belonging, helping these students understand their identities and foster hope and resilience. Although many distance themselves from organized religion due to past harm, they find alternative ways to nurture their spirituality—through journaling, music, nature walks, creative expressions, or campus groups that affirm their identities. Spirituality provides purpose and resilience, reestablishing their relationship with God in a way that affirms their queerness, acting as a quiet strength and reminder they are not alone.

Robinson recalled spirituality as a constant anchor during his transition to university, relying on prayer and gospel music for emotional support: "Even when I felt like I had not quite found my tribe here on campus, I knew that I was never alone and I had God to keep me." Wallace found spiritual grounding through meditation and poetry, which helped them find peace in their noise: "Meditation lets me breathe through my noise," and "poetry helps me put my spirit in a quiet, calm place." Bryant experienced campus affirming spaces, reinterpreting scripture to affirm his identity: "I had gone to a Bible study group one time, and I realized that there are some Christians that actually do practice being good people. I feel that religion is what has always kept people interpreting God in a way that they believe he would have been. But I know that God loves me because he created me." Foster, who distanced herself from organized religion after high school, created personal rituals like gratitude lists, singing affirmations, and playing piano—"Music is my altar. It's where I talk to God and can connect with my Him and my center." Davis found solace in long walks talking to God during her loneliness, affirming that spirituality can be a steady support during personal pain.

> ➤ **Research Question 2: How do academic integration experiences influence the persistence and academic success of first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students at an HBCU?**

Theme 5: Faculty Relationships

Thompson saw how a professor recognized his potential beyond grades, saying, 'Your presence on stage is unmatched and giving,' which made him feel he belonged. Carter showed mentorship extends beyond class when his professor introduced him to alumni, helping him get his first job. Freeman, a senior, felt motivated by faculty investment in his future, boosting his engagement. Greene's smaller classes allowed personal connections, making her feel valued and improving her sense of belonging. Ellis noted faculty helped access resources, like the writing center, fostering support. Davis emphasized consistent respect for pronouns built a foundation for inclusion. Negative experiences, like Jackson's feeling dismissed in class or Moore's lingering rejection, show bias can harm confidence. Harris' teacher's dismissal discouraged her, highlighting how faculty apathy hinders learning and motivation.

Theme 6: Gaps in Institutional Support and Academic Guidance

Despite a sense of community at HBCUs, many participants felt unsupported, with inconsistent access to advising, unclear degree requirements, and lack of transparency. LGBTQ+ students faced more gaps, struggling to find inclusive spaces or knowledgeable advisors. Support often depended on staff, not policies, making navigating college feel like a puzzle missing pieces.

Ellis, a 3.8 GPA student, relied on his advisor but discovered he was missing credits late in senior year, nearly delaying graduation. He said, "I didn't even know I was missing credits until senior year. My advisor never caught it, and nobody explained the process until it was too late. I felt like I was walking through a maze with no map—just hoping I didn't hit some dead end."

Jackson, despite claims of inclusion, saw no LGBTQ+ groups or staff, forcing students to build community themselves. He remarked, "It's like the school says they care about inclusion, but I can't find anything for people like me. No support groups, no queer staff."

Moore avoided advising offices after conflicting information about his status, managing his degree audit alone, fearing misguidance. "It's wild that three people in the same office can give different answers," he said, adding, "It makes it hard to trust anything they say. I started double-checking and doing my own research."

Freeman experienced inconsistent advising about courses and relied more on peers. He said, "I didn't know how to apply for graduation until someone mentioned it. Nobody tells you these things—you just overhear or hope to get the info. It's like the school works for students who already know how to navigate the system."

Theme 7: Identity Affirming Academic Spaces

For LGBTQ+ students at HBCUs, inclusive environments, such as classrooms, assignments, and academic relationships, are vital for affirmation, involvement, and success. These spaces allow students to share experiences, engage critically, and feel recognized, boosting their confidence and sense of purpose. When faculty foster authenticity, students show greater commitment and creativity. Such classrooms often make students feel validated both intellectually and personally, whereas hiding parts of their identities leads to disconnection and exhaustion. Data show that supportive, identity-affirming spaces are essential for persistence.

Participants noted these spaces are crucial for feeling visible, respected, and engaged through acknowledged identities. Authentic environments increase motivation and participation, while hiding identities causes disengagement and stress. Coursework and faculty support that incorporate personal identity foster intellectual challenge and validation, key to persistence. Robinson recalled a music project where students integrated cultural stories, making him feel his work reflected his identity, boosting confidence and creativity. Wallace's confidence grew through research seminars on identity and politics, analyzing LGBTQ+ policies and connecting theory with real-world impact. He felt validated, which strengthened his resolve to pursue policy careers. Recognition within academic spaces helps solidify aspirations and self-esteem.

> ➢ **Research Question 3: How do social integration factors influence the persistence and academic success of first- generation African American LGBTQ+ students at an HBCU?**

Theme 8: Belonging Through Peer Support

Many participants found peer support crucial for persistence and well-being at an HBCU. Forming or joining affirming peer groups, whether LGBTQ+ organizations or informal networks, helped counteract isolation and pressures from multiple marginalized identities. Participants stressed these connections were more than social; they fostered self-worth and focus on goals. Often tied to shared Black cultural identity, these friendships became safe spaces for authentic expression. Wallace appreciated finding peers who accepted his pronouns and relationship, making it easier to be himself in class. Bryant and Foster shared similar experiences, emphasizing how support helped them express themselves and engage more actively. Some participants highlighted peer groups' protective role against hostile campus environments. Davis credited her friends with preventing her from dropping a class despite feeling invisible, and regular check-ins made her feel seen and supported. Thompson recounted how friends ensured her safety after rehearsals, seeing this as essential for survival, especially living in the South.

Theme 9: Navigating Visibility and Social Safety

Navigating visibility and safety was a delicate balance for many participants, involving constant negotiation between authenticity and protection influenced by campus climate, peer dynamics, and perceived risks. Visibility was shaped by environment, encouraging openness or demanding concealment. Some felt affirmation, but many remained cautious, fearing disclosure could threaten their safety or belonging. Greene described her strategic self-presentation, noting she could be open in some spaces but had boundaries. Jackson recalled how homophobic remarks cooled his initial excitement about campus groups, illustrating how subtle bias led to concealment.

Ellis highlighted the emotional toll of reading the room before sharing personal details, while Alexander shared how faculty comments led her to hide her sexuality to avoid discrimination. These choices affected academic engagement, with students avoiding certain classes or groups. Robinson discussed how concealment was more common in male-dominated spaces, while Wallace emphasized the emotional exhaustion of constant vigilance, feeling like he was playing a role. Bryant reflected on how visibility changed over time, from secrecy to cautious openness, revealing ongoing management of identity.

Theme 10: Campus Culture and Safe Spaces

Participants described an inconsistent campus climate for LGBTQ+ students, with some progress but uneven availability and quality of safe spaces, often limited to certain departments or groups rather than integrated into campus life. Pockets of inclusion were valued but fragile without institutional commitment. Harris noted visibility issues, saying, "We have an Inclusivity Week... outside of those events, the energy dies down...I wish there was something consistent." Foster, Jackson, and Beaugard called for lasting structures

instead of symbolic gestures. Freeman said safety varies by location, requiring students to navigate risks. Beaugard argued that reliance on individuals creates instability, calling for institutional protections. Moore highlighted the lack of LGBTQ+ representation in curricula, especially Black LGBTQ+ voices. Safe spaces are often hidden; some are created informally when official ones are absent. Wallace emphasized the need for enforceable policies backed by administration to ensure safety. Greene linked safety to student well-being and retention, while Jackson noted constant vigilance hampers academic focus.

Theme 11: Belonging Through Campus Engagement

This theme examined how participants discovered belonging through campus involvement and engagement. For many, leadership roles, participation in student organizations, and advocacy work were lifelines to belonging and personal affirmation. Engaging in campus leadership offered spaces to merge identity exploration with social integration, allowing their presence and voices to be acknowledged in ways that contrasted with other parts of campus life. Involvement in leadership roles often deepened relationships, cultivated support networks, and provided meaningful outlets for self-expression. For some, leadership was a way to challenge stereotypes and shift narratives around LGBTQ+ students at HBCUs. The sense of purpose from advocacy or creative leadership reinforced their connection to the institution but also fostered persistence despite the challenges of being first-generation and LGBTQ+.

Alexander explained her leadership roles within student-led cultural programs gave her a stronger voice than in the classroom. She said, "I realized that if I wanted more representation, I had to help create it. Being part of event planning and student organizing allowed me to make spaces for people like me, even when those spaces didn't exist before." Her campus work provided a safe space to thrive. Robinson saw performance and leadership in arts as validation and resistance, saying, "When I'm on stage, I feel free. People see my talent before they see I'm gay. Leading rehearsals or planning showcases made me feel respected, and it changed how I saw myself here." Leadership countered the invisibility he felt elsewhere. Wallace described chairing an LGBTQ+ student committee, saying, "I joined to meet people but then saw our work was making a difference—changing policies, planning awareness events, and providing a safe space. Leadership gave me the power to push for things I needed when I first arrived."

Bryant, Ellis, and Moore highlighted personal growth from leading a department student association. Ellis said, "It forced me to show up, even when I didn't feel like it, and gave me a reason to stay focused on my classes. A leadership position helped me navigate being openly gay at an HBCU by centering me in a community that valued my contributions." For Moore, advocacy was a turning point; he stated, "We pushed the administration to hold a Pride event. We didn't get everything we wanted, but the process showed me I could make real change."

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study explored how academic and social integration affect persistence and achievement among first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students at two HBCUs in the Southeastern U.S., using Tinto's Student Departure Theory. Interviews with 15 students

revealed their experiences were shaped by intersecting factors like first-generation status, race, sexuality, gender identity, and campus environment. Participants described first-generation pressure combined with motivation from family sacrifice, community pride, and role model aspirations. While stressful, these fostered resilience and commitment. Themes of Pre-College Silence and Identity Discovery emerged, as many entered college in the closet due to family, religious, or cultural pressures. Supportive peers and campus environments helped them accept their identities and boost confidence. Family dynamics varied from rejection to subtle support, sometimes acting as challenges and motivators.

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Participants' attributes formed through early life experiences influenced their success at HBCUs. First-generation identity motivated yet pressured students, with family expectations impacting persistence (Thompson's experience). Lack of institutional support increased challenges, emphasizing the need for resources. Greene's story highlighted familial obligation and resilience amid limited support. Pre-college, many LGBTQ+ students concealed identities due to stigma; college offered a safer space for exploration within supportive subcultures. Successful integration depends on access to accepting communities, essential for authentic identity development.

Family influence played a complex role in shaping persistence, offering support and obstacles. Foster described her parents as her "biggest cheerleaders" for her academics, but they remained silent about her sexuality, reflecting nuanced support—affirmation in some areas but silence in others. This aligns with Snapp et al.'s (2019) findings that LGBTQ+ students of color often experience compartmentalized family support—positive in academics but rejecting or silent about sexuality. Moore's family expressed pride in his achievements but remained silent on his identity, prompting him to seek validation elsewhere. These stories suggest that even partial family support can strengthen persistence, especially with support from peers or mentors (Garvey et al., 2019).

Overall, students' motivation and drive were keys to their perseverance and success in higher education, closely tied to their experiences of negotiating pre-college silence—unspoken social or cultural expectations before college. Family influences shape students' attitudes, values, and aspirations, contributing to a multifaceted pre-entry identity. Spirituality offers resilience and purpose, reinforcing internal motivation. These attributes are dynamic, evolving as students navigate personal histories, backgrounds, and campus environments, impacting their academic and social adaptation and integration. Narratives in this study reinforce Tinto's idea that persistence depends on commitment and motivation but also highlight how intersecting identities—race, gender, socioeconomic status—interact with resilience, flexibility, and self-efficacy, influencing ongoing commitment. Recognizing this fluidity calls for policies addressing diversities in each student's journey.

Participants emphasized relationships with faculty as crucial for persistence, beyond formal curriculum. Harris recounted a professor's caring email after her absence, boosting her engagement and self-efficacy—aligning with research showing faculty outreach fosters belonging and institutional commitment. Foster described a mentor who encouraged her to apply for an internship, broadening her post-graduation perspectives, especially impactful for LGBTQ+ students of color, supporting Garvey et al.'s (2019) findings.

Participants identified issues with institutional support and academic guidance. Moore faced advising errors that delayed his graduation, echoing Ortega and Swinton's (2019) research. Greene experienced bureaucratic inefficiencies in resolving registration issues, illustrating structural barriers highlighted by Cady et al. (2021) Despite faculty support, advising structures often fail students, questioning institutional integration as per Tinto's theory.

Lastly, identity-affirming spaces in classes—like discussions on LGBTQ+ topics— helped students feel validated and increased engagement by reducing the strain of hiding parts of their identity, fostering deeper learning and participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON STUDY RESULTS

This study highlights opportunities for HBCUs to improve practices supporting first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students. Recommendations include faculty development on LGBTQ+ inclusion, restructured advising tailored for these students, and expanding LGBTQ+ affirming spaces and programs. Partnering with faith leaders and providing leadership opportunities with support systems can also foster an inclusive environment. Implementing these strategies requires collaboration across departments and community groups, aiming to increase student success and create a campus culture that values diversity. This holistic approach can serve as a model for longer-term progress in higher education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

This study highlights key policy and practice implications for HBCUs and similar institutions to enhance first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students' persistence and success. It emphasizes implementing inclusive nondiscrimination policies covering sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression, with reporting and enforcement mechanisms, alongside visible messaging that affirms LGBTQ+ students' rights and dignity to foster an inclusive campus climate. Policies should ensure equitable access to gender-inclusive restrooms, housing, and health services, creating a safe, supportive environment to boost students' well-being, participation, and academic achievement. On the practical side, faculty and staff need development programs to adopt culturally responsive, LGBTQ+-affirming approaches, including curriculum content that reflects diverse identities. Creating safe classroom settings promotes open dialogue and reduces identity-related stress, contributing to a more inclusive, supportive educational community that nurtures all students' success.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how pre-entry attributes, academic and social integration influence the persistence and success of first-generation African American LGBTQ+ students at two southeastern HBCUs, guided by Tinto's (1975) theory. It explored 15 students' experiences navigating intersections of race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and first-generation status within campus environments with both supportive and challenging elements. Using interviews, it showed students relied on motivation, peer and mentor relationships, and strategic campus navigation to succeed. Findings support and expand Tinto's model,

highlighting relationships, belonging, and engagement as crucial for persistence. They also challenge the idea that full integration is always beneficial, suggesting a strategic balance for safety and visibility helps persistence. The study identified spirituality as an important resilience factor, serving as personal and social capital. It contributed to limited research on LGBTQ+ students at HBCUs, especially first-generation students, emphasizing the importance of intersectional approaches recognizing overlapping systems of privilege and oppression. The findings suggest HBCUs should adopt inclusive strategies, improve advising, and foster leadership that promotes equity to support these students. Despite limitations like sample size, the personal narratives provide valuable insights for future research, advocating for larger, longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-methods studies to deepen understanding of student success.

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