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## Understanding Effective Orientation Practices From Orientation Professionals at Public HBCUs

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Understanding Effective Orientation Practices From Orientation Professionals at Public  
HBCUs

by  
Ronnie Mack

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
and School of Criminal Justice  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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2020

## **Approval Page**

This applied dissertation was submitted by Ronnie Mack under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Ronnie Mack  
Name

August 19, 2020  
Date

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## **Abstract**

Understanding Effective Orientation Practices From Orientation Professionals at Public HBCUs. Ronnie Mack, 2020: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: HBCU, retention, orientation programs, transition, first-year experience, belonging, higher education

This applied dissertation focused on understanding the perceptions of orientation professionals of the impact of orientation programming at public historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). This study illustrates the effective practices of orientation programming and their impact on the retention of first – year African American students.

The theoretical framework that supported this study focused on challenge & support, retention, involvement, transition, belonging, and Black identity theory. The research study looked to understand orientation professionals’ perceptions of the impact of orientation programming at a public HBCU on the successful transition and retention of first-year students

The qualitative multiple case study incorporated an interview protocol and documentation review for twelve participants who all supervise orientation programs. The research findings resulted in the elucidation of six themes which are: Theme 1: Impacting retention with trained orientation leaders; Theme 2: Impacting retention by connecting students to resources to impact barriers to first-year retention and transition; Theme 3: Impacting retention by understanding the role of orientation within first-year retention; Theme 4: Impacting retention by connecting parents to the student transition process; Theme 5: Impacting retention by utilizing effective orientation practices from the student affairs field; and Theme 6: Impacting retention by promoting community, history, and tradition to create belonging

This research addressed how orientation programs create a sense of belonging for Black students as they transition into the college experience. Future recommendations to duplicate the study with private HBCUs and compare the experiences to public HBCUs. The recommendations presents opportunities to develop research based “best practices” for orientation practices within the HBCU space.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Statement of the Problem

Approximately 20.4 million students began their college journey during the Fall 2017 semester with a projected 1.9 million students to expected to graduate in the Spring of 2018 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a). In the case of African American students, the percentage of students enrolled in four-year universities increased from 30.5% to 34.9% from 2000 -2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a). Many African Americans consider education the most effective means to improving their standing in today's society (Johnson, 2013). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2018) reported that 67% of African American students persisted to their sophomore year, which was the lowest among the major ethnic groups (Asian – 85.3%, White – 78.6%, and Hispanic -70.7%). With an increased focus on gainful employment and federal funding connected to student retention colleges and universities are searching for innovative ways to retain their marginalized students (Bingham & Solverson, 2016).

The problem is that African American retention practices within colleges and universities has been focused within the Predominately White Institutions (PWI) experience and not investigated within Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU) experience. The failure of a substantial number of freshmen, especially first-year, African American students, to transition into college successfully is often attributed to retention/attrition. This multiple case study explored the role of an orientation program to address the issue of the first-year retention within the HBCU space. The terms *Black* and *African American* are used interchangeable throughout the study.

The study focused on public HBCUs with retention rates above the African American national average. HBCUs make up 3% of the higher education landscape but account for about 25% of the total African American student population (Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2014). Many of the public HBCUs are creating innovative and creative ways to increase retention while serving underserved and underrepresented populations. For example, FAMU, which ranks as the 6<sup>th</sup> HBCU on the U.S. News & World Report, boasts a retention rate of 83%. To continue to support the HBCU mission of providing access to all types of students, these institutions must focus on creative ways of engaging students earlier in their experience (U.S. News & World Report, 2018a).

Tinto (1993) stated that creating a sense of belonging for students leads to deeper commitment to the institution and directly impacts retention. The orientation program is an institution's first major opportunity to cultivate that sense of belonging with a student. The Association for Orientation, Transition and Retention in Higher Education (NODA) defines orientation as:

Deliberate programmatic and service efforts designed to facilitate the transition of new students to the institution; prepare students for the institutions educational opportunities and student responsibilities; initiate the integration of new students into the intellectual, cultural, and social climate of the institution; and support the parents, partners, guardians, and children of the new student (NODA – Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education, 2012, para 2).

### **Phenomenon of Interest**

The phenomenon of interest is the retention at public HBCUs and the connection to orientation programs. Among all colleges and universities, 67% of African American students are retained beyond the first year in college. Based on the U.S News and World Report (2018), there are nine public HBCUs with retention rates higher than 67%. The highest being Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU), with an 83% retention rate. The lowest being Prairie View Agriculture & Mechanical University (PVAMU), with a rating of 69%). Students who make academic and social connections during orientation are retained at a higher rate than students who do not (Mullendore, 1998; Ward – Roof, 2010). The focus of this study is to examine effective orientation practices from the perspective of public HBCU professionals. In the case of the Michigan State University study, students found that orientation positively impacted their desire to be retained (Prasad, Showler, Ryan, Schmitt, & Nye, 2017). This was especially noted among African American students. In the case of this study of public HBCUs, the researcher plans to investigate a similar connection between orientation programming and first-year retention.

### **Background and Justification**

Orientation programming since its infancy was developed with student retention and success in mind. Reviewing the history of orientation in the context of American higher education illustrates that early connection. Boston University produced the first orientation program in 1888, while the University of Maine created the first weeklong program in 1923 (Ward-Roof, 2010). Originally, the faculty provided events that focused

on the transition of new students. These events not only focused on course registration, but also introduced new students to many of their responsibilities academically and socially. Many of the early versions of orientation events took place in a residential experience at the institution. With the increase in orientation programs between 1920 to 1940, orientation responsibility shifted from the faculty to campus administration. This contributed to an increase in student affairs professionals once administrators understood the need for faculty to focus on course preparation, and that a professional was needed to coordinate these onboarding efforts. The dean of men orchestrated early orientation efforts until the early 1970s when institutions began applying institutional approaches to orientation. The focus expanded from being institution focused content to encompassing the student's development, transition, and retention needs (Ward-Roof, 2010).

In 1948, the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA - Association for Orientation, Transition and Retention in Higher Education) conducted their first meeting in Columbus, Ohio. This was the initial opportunity for orientation professionals to begin exchanging ideas and practices concerning new student orientation and new student programs (Ward-Roof, 2010). It was not until 1979 that NODA began producing concrete research to support orientation programming and provide perspective on trends within the entire industry. This was the inaugural year for the NODA Databank that provides data every three to five years, which allowed institutions to benchmark their efforts against national standards. In the same year, NODA was a founding member of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (NODA, 2012). CAS creates the assessment opportunity for institutions to improve and develop their orientation, transition, and retention programs. CAS standards include but are not limited to

information on retention, student development, and assessment (NODA, 2012; Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2014).

In the 2017, NODA Databank Reported that 97% of the institutions surveyed acknowledged conducting some sort of orientation programming. The NODA Databank is a national resource for statistical data around orientation, transition, and retention programs. Approximately, 83% of programs included a family orientation component. Most of the orientation programs were focused on parents, first-year students, and transfer students. Only 31% of orientation programs surveyed had a component that focuses on specialized populations. Data is similar regarding transition programs where only 35% of institution focused on specialized populations (NODA, 2018). Summer continues to be the time many programs offer orientation with fall programs focused on smaller populations. Many orientation programs find success with utilizing peer-to-peer interactions, specialized content, and extending the experience more than a few days (Masterson, 2017). Orientation programs are presenting content on basic transactional activities such as course registration, payment, and campus policies. Many institutions are using orientation to promote the institutional mission by focusing on topics such as sexual assault, diversity, and others during that initial experience. The focus of programming is transitioning from large catch all programs to smaller peer led interaction. There continues to be an increase in extended orientation programs to ensure students are receiving all the necessary resources to ensure success (Masterson, 2017).

**Historically Black Colleges & Universities.** Prior to 1964, African Americans were only permitted to attend HBCUs. Many were established during the time after slavery to support newly freed slaves transitioning to freedom. Congress passed the

Morrill Land-Grant Act in 1862, to provide funding to education for farmers, scientist, etc., through creating colleges and universities. The first HBCU founded in 1837 was Cheyney University. Funding for public HBCUs was not provided until the passing of the second Land-Grant Act, which created the opportunity for states to open Black institutions that would serve as alternatives to their White counterparts. Prior to this, many HBCUs were privately funded. In 2016, it was reported that HBCUs were responsible for graduating 25% of African American undergraduate students (Mfume, 2016). In addition, HBCUs boast statistics, such as producing 80% of African American judges, 40% of African American engineers, as well as 70% of African American dentists (TMCF, 2019).

The researcher looks to gain an understanding of HBCU orientation programming as a pivotal transition in the college experience. The researcher looks to create understanding of the historical framework of retention theory and the dearth of research concerning HBCU populations. The researcher seeks to gain knowledge on the importance of early engagement through the orientation programs and its impact on new students within the HBCU environment. The researcher seeks to understand the importance of racial identity development in the HBCU orientation experience.

### **Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Further study is needed on HBCU student retention and the overall impact of orientation programming. Gasman and Samayoa (2017) stated that public HBCUs, based on refined metrics, boast completion rates of 61.8%, which is slightly double than the national average via the National Student Clearinghouse rates. Hoover (2013), stated that by 2020 the demographics of high school graduates would be 45% minority students.

Higher education institutions should be preparing for this shift in their incoming student classes. Historically, HBCUs have focused their enrollment on minority students and their overall success. Previous research suggests that HBCUs are successful at retaining and graduating minority students. Understanding the success models of HBCUs would provide positive dividends for other institutional types looking to increase the success of their minority students. Pertaining to the literature, there is a lack of research concerning HBCUs in the areas of student success, retention and graduate rates, student persistence, and degree completion. Allen and Esters (2018) argued that mainstream media portrays the narrative of African American student success from the perspective of PWIs, not HBCUs or other minority serving institutions (MSIs). The researchers go on to state that it is imperative that HBCUs continue to generate narrative around the success of their programs. There is little research to provide models and effective practices specifically for HBCU professionals concerning their specialized institutions. Mfume (2016) goes on to say, “there is little documentation on successful, large-scale retention and graduation strategies at HBCUs that is authored by the faculty, staff, or administrators within these institutions” (p. xv). One of the focuses of this study fill in gaps with quality research from the perspectives of professionals who engage in student success practices. Hinton (2014), suggested that students at HBCUs be provided an effective orientation that help students enter the institutional environment with an open mind, while focused on a purpose. Furthermore, additional studies should be developed to understand the effectiveness of orientation programs at HBCUs in regard to student transition and success.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU).** HBCUs are predominantly African American colleges and universities founded prior to 1964 that were originally intended to provide higher education. There are currently 105 HBCUs in 20 states, District of Columbia, and U.S. Virgin Islands. Though they represent less than 3 percent of all colleges and universities, they award 18 percent of all degrees earned by Black undergraduates (Gasman & Arroyo, 2014).

**Minority Serving Institution (MSI).** “Minority-serving institution (MSI) is a term used to describe a range of higher education institutions. There are MSIs with foundational missions to educate a specific demographic of students, such as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and tribal colleges and universities (TCUs). Additionally, there are MSIs that have met a federally defined threshold of enrollment of a particular demographic and student financial need (measured by a proportion of Pell Grant-eligible students), such as Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-serving institutions (AANAPISIs)” (Blake, 2017).

**Orientation.** “Deliberate programmatic and service efforts designed to facilitate the transition of new students to the institution; prepare students for the institutions educational opportunities and student responsibilities; initiate the integration of new students into the intellectual, cultural, and social climate of the institution; and support the parents, partners, guardians, and children of the new student” (NODA, 2012 pg. 1).



**Predominately White Institution (PWI).** Is defined as a term used to describe institutions of higher education, in which the student enrollment is 50% or more Caucasian (Hinton & Woods, 2019).

**Retention.** Retention is student progression through higher education, which focuses primarily on student persistence (i.e., term to term) through the beginning of the second year at the same institution, with the goal of graduating from that institution and/or achievement of personal educational objectives (NODA, 2012).

**Second Morrill Act.** Twenty-eight years after the establishment of the first Morrill Act, the Second Morrill Act was established for many of the nation's public historically HBCUs, including Kentucky State University, North Carolina A&T University, and Alabama A&M University. The states were provided the opportunity to either enroll African Americans or create separate institutions. As a result, 18 HBCUs were established in response to that option (Wilson, 2012).

**Transition.** Transition is “the process students go through (typically lasting up to one year) when entering a particular institution of higher education and/or entering the same institution for a new purpose” (NODA, 2012, pg. 1).

### **Audience**

The study is beneficial to higher education practitioners who work in the areas of orientation, transition, and retention programming. This study may benefit practitioners who work with underrepresented populations at HBCUs, PWIs, and other MSIs. The study provides perspective to campus administrators to increase understanding and support of orientation programming. Lastly, the study provides perspective to students

and parents on the importance engaging and completing new student orientation programs.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to understand orientation professionals' perceptions of the impact of orientation programming at a public HBCU on the successful transition and retention of first-year students. The research connected themes, practices, and commonalities among these institutions that benefit not only HBCUs but also PWIs with large African American populations. Additionally, the research connected effective orientation practices that positively influence first-year retention of African American students at public HBCUs. The institutions involved in the research were universities ranked in the U.S. News & World Report – Best Historically Black College & Universities with above average retention rates. Lastly, the research focuses on many of the core commitments of the National Resource Center by providing an understanding of the different nuances of transition for the first-year African American student within an inclusive environment.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the issue of African American student retention. Next, provided foundational information on orientation programming and the gap in the literature concerning orientation programming at HBCUs. The chapter further discussed literature concerning the history of HBCUs and specific HBCUs with higher than average African American retention. There are continued increases in minority students entering college and continued funding metrics connected to their retention. There is adequate research around the topic of retention but there is little information

about the phenomena from the HBCU perspective. Lastly, the chapter makes the observation to lack of research around the orientation professionals who coordinate these programs and the need to examine this perspective.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Higher education administrators are continuously interested in practices and programs that can increase retention on their campus. Many institutions create specialized committees and taskforces to ensure that all students are retained at a higher rate each academic year. This chapter aims to provide literary evidence of the connection between orientation and first-year retention. Orientation programs are the first opportunity of engagement for students to learn about the policies, procedures, traditions, and resources of an institution. Many of these introductory elements are key for the success of students for the first academic year and beyond. In addition, it allows initial connections to be built between new students and campus administration. Orientation programming provides new students and families a lasting first impression which has an impact on their sense of belonging at the institution. This chapter covered the following additional topics: Theoretical Framework, Orientation, Orientation Theory, HBCU History and Contemporary Issues, Impact of Retention, Orientation Programming, as well as trends in the field. This overall study provided perspectives from orientation professionals and how they create programming to impact retention. The review of these topics and the overall study, and the approach of how HBCUs create a distinct sense of belonging among their students emerge as critical factors of their programmatic success.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This section provided a historical context to the fundamental theories that inform the practice of professional. Those particular theories are Sanford's Challenge & Support Theory, Tinto's Retention Theory, Astin's Involvement Theory, Schlossburg's Transition

Theory, Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging, and Cross's Black Identity Theory. The theories provide context on the key components of an orientation program. These areas of focus involve the ideas of student involvement, retention, transition, sense of belonging, and racial identity. These are all factors that have a direct impact on the success of first-year students. In addition, this section provides the history of the development of orientation. Which also provides a clear connection to early students' success and early orientation programming. Much of the theories and history, aside from Cross' research, do not have exclusive reporting on the success of African American students.

### **Orientation Theory**

This section provides a historical information on the key theories that support orientation programming.

**Sanford's Balance of Support and Challenge Theory.** Sanford's (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011) challenge and support theory is a foundational student development theory within student affairs as well as orientation programming. Sanford considered development as the organization of increasing complexity (Schuh et al., 2011). He recognized early the impact of the collegiate environment on the development of students during their adolescent transition. Sanford theorizes that students need balance of support and challenges to ensure effective student development. Within Sanford's framework, the institution occupies one of two roles. An institution either employs individuals and policies that support the student or impede the progress and development of the student (Schuh et al., 2011). The different approaches to challenges and support can vary based on institution and student population type. The collegiate environment serves as the key for student development. The institution must be strategic in regard to the level of

challenge and support it introduces to students. If the challenge is minimal, students do not develop, and if the challenge is too great, students retreat. This has a direct impact on the retention of students. This has key implications within orientation in a few ways. Orientation leaders can be utilized as key guides to help a new student navigate challenges. Administrators can orchestrate programming that challenges the development of students but still provides supports because it is within a controlled environment. Examples of such challenges are course selection, advising, campus policies, and major selection.

**Tinto's Retention Theory.** Vincent Tinto is considered as one of the first researchers to study student departure and student retention. Tinto is most cited and widely known for his persistence and retention research (Metz, 2002). Initially, there was little research on student departure and the research that discussed it focused much of it on the fault on the student for not matriculating. A student lack of persistence was commonly attributed to their individual traits, skills, and motivations (Tinto, 2006). Simply stating, students were considered at fault for the lack of persistence, not the institution. Tinto defined non-matriculation as “student departure,” which is the act of a student withdrawing from a university or system of higher education (Tinto, 2006). Tinto's theory draws attention to the importance of academic and social integration of students, building faculty and student connections, which influences the persistence of students (Hundrieser & Voigt, 2008). The earliest version of this theory, which collaborated the results of Cullen's attrition research, 1973 focused on the following components: (a) pre-entry attributes; (b) goals/commitment; (c) institutional experiences; (d) integration; (e) goals/commitments (internal and external commitments); and (f)

outcome (departure decision) (Metz, 2002). The focus of Tinto's model was to provide evidence-based research for higher education professionals to deeply understand the personal, logical, psychological, and institutional variables that influence a student (Flowers, 2004).

Van Gennep's (1960) rite of passage theory, which focused on human integration into unknown settings, provided the foundation of Tinto's early theory. Van Gennep's research was heavily influenced by sociologist Durkheim, who studied the correlations of suicide and departure (Metz, 2002). Durkheim defined suicides as a type of departure and is caused by an individual failing to integrate into a new environment. Durkheim considered suicide egotistical to mean that a person's failed attempt to enter a community is intellectual and social in nature. Van Gennep expanded on Durkheim's theory to suggest that when an individual transitions effectively into a community, that person moves into another stage and celebrates that transitional occurrence. Tinto transposed his theory onto Van Gennep's rite of passage theory in the sense that students need to acclimate to their institutional environment to be successful. If students do not accurately transition into their institution based on the students' preconceived expectations, the student is likely not to complete. Tactics such as peer connection, faculty/staff support, and extracurricular involvement can help the student persist.

There has been some criticism from other researchers of the limited scope of Tinto's retention model. Some criticism coming from Vincent Tinto himself. Tinto (2006) stated that his early research mainly focused on the retention of majority students on traditional residential campuses. Much of Tinto's early research discussed the need for students to break away from their home communities. This is actually a detriment to

many students from minority populations that succeed off a “village” mentality when it comes to their needs. This idea was amended in Tinto later research noting the family, tribe, and church are essential to the persistence of some student (Tinto, 2006). Lastly, Tinto retention theory, other theorists as well, have not examined the experience of low-income students in the areas of retention and persistence.

**Astin’s Student Involvement Theory.** Garland (2010) stated, “Students become invested in their education through involvement”. Alexander Astin is one of the most cited theorists on the subject student involvement/engagement. Astin ascertained that students learn and are more success if they are involved in all areas of college life. Astin claims expertise and experience in the areas of psychology as well as higher education theory. Student involvement can be defined as the physical and psychological energy allocated to a student’s academic experience in college (Astin, 1999). His student involvement theory is historically grounded in Freudian theory. Astin referred the concept of cathexis, which believes that individuals invest psychological energy into objects and other people outside of themselves. Examples of this concept can be reflected in time spent with family, friends, schoolwork, and jobs. Student involvement focuses on the behavior of the student, not the psychological intention (motivation) of the student. Astin asserted that the action of the student exhibits involvement, not necessarily how the student thinks or behaves. Student involvement theory is broken down into five key elements. First, as previously stated, involvement is connected to the energy dispersed to physical and psychological objects. Secondly, based on the student involvement is along a continuum. Involvement can be displayed in different ways and scenarios based on the individual student. Thirdly, there are quantitative and qualitative measures to student



involvement. An example of quantitative is it can be the number of hours a student studies while qualitative can be the student's thoughts on their class experience. Next, the quantity and quality of a student involvement program can be assessed by the amount of personal development and student learning connected to the program. Lastly, effectiveness of an educational policy can be measured by its impact of student involvement. Students who feel connected to their institution appear to have a positive outlook on their collegiate experience and, in turn, matriculate to graduation (Garland, 2010). Student involvement has a direct impact on student retention. Researchers have provided some perspective into the connection between campus involvement and higher retention rates, but it has yet to be proven if a lack of involvement leads to lower retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Garland, 2010). One of the earliest opportunities presented to students to become involved happens during the new student orientation experience.

Astin believed that students would be motivated toward involvement if institutions can provide stimulating and challenging learning opportunities (Long, 2012). If students are not provided support from campus faculty and student affairs staff, their involvement is hindered. If extracurricular activities are not aligned with the student's interest or career goals, involvement is severely hindered. Astin encourages faculty to be flexible to the ever-fluid schedule of their students while connecting the outside class experience to the interest of their students. Orientation provides the opportune time to provide students and families information that can be connected to the student's interests and aspirations. An example is a student organization fair.

Like Tinto's early research, Astin theory did provide information from a majority perspective. It does not take into account the involvement or lack of involvement of minority students engaging in a dominant culture prior to their campus enrollment. The campus environment plays a pivotal role in the involvement of a student. If a student does not feel a sense of belonging or support, there are likely to be uninvolved. If a student experiences bias or discrimination from the campus community that student's involvement certainly diminishes. In addition, Astin study focused on mostly traditional students (18 -22). It did not incorporate the growing populations of nontraditional students entering the college ranks. Astin himself recognized further areas of exploration that future researchers could uncover. One such idea of studying the exceptions to student involvement. There are students who are involved in college but still do not persist and some students who are not involved but still matriculate.

**Schlossberg Transition Theory.** Schlossberg's Transition Theory is an adult development theory that focused on the transitions that individuals encounter throughout life and the process by which they cope and adapt (Schlossberg et al., 1995; Taylor, 2009). Transitions are events or non-events that can alter a person's relationships, assumptions, routines, and roles (Taylor, 2009). Students entering college is a major transitional event for students and the orientation process provides support through that transition. Transition theory focused on an individual's interactions to these variables that influence a person's transition: (1) the student's perception of the transition, (2) characteristics of the pre-transition and post transition environments, and (3) characteristics of the student experiencing the transition; where each set of variables could include sections that might be considered an asset, liabilities, a mix of the two, or

neutral in their influence on the capability of the student to deal with a particular transition (DeVilbiss, 2014). The first stage focuses on the individuals understanding of where they are within the transition. The individuals ask the question if they are “moving in”, “moving through”, or “moving out” of the transition. The second stage the individual takes is inventory of their “coping resources” and separates those resources into four subcategories: situation, self, support, or strategies. Situation examines the overall transition and how it may affect the individual. Self is the person’s perspective on life and how their characteristics affect that perspective. Support refers to the resources available to the person. Strategies are the actions the person takes to effectively engage and proceed through the transition. The final stage (“taking charge”) focuses on strengthening resources (Wall, Fetherston, & Browne, 2018). The focus of the researcher is to understand orientation impact on the transition of a student at HBCUs. In addition, how are programs created to ensure an effective transition and generate a sense of belonging for HBCU students?

**Strayhorn’s Belonging Theory.** Sense of belonging is a thoroughly researched topic within the literature (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Belch, 2004-2005; Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002; Strayhorn, 2013; Strayhorn, 2019). Belonging is defined as, “the degree to which an individual feel respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a define group” (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 87). In the psychological sense, a student’s sense of belonging can appear as how a person feels valued within their community.” (Hausmann et al., 2007 p. 804). Strayhorn stated that creating a sense of belonging is key to a student’s success. The Strayhorn model is based on studies conducted on various minorities, such as LGBTA, STEM Students, African Americans, HBCU students, etc.

His theory is grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which focuses on the fulfillment of needs as important to learning, creativity, and innovation. Maslow (1954) stated, "If both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, there will emerge the love and affection and belongingness needs" (p. 78). Belonging is a component of the motivational framework that results in positive educational outcome for both the institution and individual student. The models have seven core elements (Strayhorn, 2019):

- Sense of belonging is a considered a foundational human need
- Sense of being is a fundamental motive
- Sense of belonging takes on increased importance in specific contexts, times, and among specific groups
- Sense of belonging is related to mattering (mattering is separated into five dimensions: commanding notice; importance or object concern; dependence or feeling needed; appreciated or feeling respected, and ego extension or others share in success/failure.)
- Sense of belonging is developed and constructed by social identities
- Sense of belonging changes with time and place; must be satisfied consistently
- Sense of belonging leads to beneficial results

Strayhorn (2019) stated that the model can be exceptionally useful to HBCUs to assess the Black student experience. HBCUs provide an environment that celebrates Black culture and provides positive imagery that racially affirms their students. These environments provide protection for students from racial discrimination, prejudice, and

micro aggressions as a result increases the student's sense of belonging. Even when difficult situations arise on these campuses, students are less likely to attribute these difficulties to race. It is not an absolute notion that all students automatically feel a sense of belonging on HBCU campuses. The sense of belonging is to be created, nurtured, and facilitated, and found throughout the process of matriculation (Strayhorn, 2019).

Strayhorn (2019) asserted that to promote success within these environments HBCUs would do well to implement comprehensive new student orientation programs to help a student adjust to campus life, connect with peers and faculty, and educate students on campus history.

Individuals are prone to satisfy their sense of belonging just as they would their physiological needs (Strayhorn, 2019). Without belonging, individuals deal negative pathologies as a result. Suicide research discusses that individuals with suicidal thoughts are known to feel a sense of burdensomeness and social alienation (Joiner 2005, 2010; Strayhorn, 2019). In a different scope, belonging can generate positive academic performance, retention, and persistence among students (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Rhee, 2008; Strayhorn, 2019). Belonging is critical to retraining all students, especially students of color. Staff and faculty must focus on creating belonging within the classroom and outside the classroom to ensure student success.

**Cross' Black Identity Theory.** Cross' Black identity theory is considered the most cited researcher on Black identity theory (Neville & Cross, 2016). The original model described the progression of Black identity in which the self-concept of Blackness develops through five stages. The five stages are pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment (Anglin & Wade, 2007). Later

adaptation of theory includes flexibility and variability in attitudes within each stage. In the pre-encounter stage, students hold attitudes on the continuum from low salience to race neutrality to anti-Black. In other words, individuals do not consider race to be a factor in their everyday lives. In some cases, Black individuals come to hate and loathe Black people in favor of a Eurocentric cultural perspective. The encounter stage, an event occurs that shatters the individual's worldview and current perspective. This occurs in two sub steps, which are encounter and personalize. In the encounter step, the individual recognizes the event which occurs, such as discrimination occurs in the classroom. Personalization results in the person taking action toward the event, such as joining the Black Student Association on campus. The immersion-emersion stage is the aftermath of the encounter, which results in the individual beginning to construct a new frame of reference in regard to race. The person has not fully changed their viewpoints but commits to creating change. The individual begins to become focus on information concerning their racial upbringing and culture that represents Blackness.

**Cross' Black Identity Theory & HBCUs.** HBCUs provide an intuitive space to assist students in the immersion-emersion transition but providing in depth understanding Black history, art, and culture. Internalization is the transition between period where the individuals encounters challenges and issues with their new identity. Last is the internalization-commitment stage. This stage focuses on the longstanding commitment to Black affairs over time. The result of this stage is a student having a health sense of self-worth and pride connected to their racial identity (Ritchey, 2014). The focus of the researcher is to understand how this connection to Black identity, which is prominent on

HBCU campuses, supports creating the sense of belonging. In addition, understanding how this celebration of identity occurs within the orientation program.

### **Orientation**

This section is a brief overview of orientation programming history, structure, and trends. This section creates understanding of the importance of orientation programming. In addition, it allows for understanding the trends that influence the continuous development and changes within the field.

The first record orientation program was created by Boston University in 1888. The University of Maine in 1923 was the first institution to create a “freshmen week”, a week of welcome program prior to the start of the semester (Ward-Roof, 2010). The early focus of these programs was for faculty to educate students on expectations and policies of the institution. Many of these interactions were mainly transactional instead of relational. Many of these interactions occur within the residential facilities on the campus. The faculty shouldered most of the orientation work early on, and later upperclassmen were introduced to assist with the transition. Between 1920 and 1940, there was a vast increase in formalized orientation programs across the country. After 1950, the development of student affairs professionals came about to allow faculty to focus on their coursework. Many of these professionals, usually dean of men, operated under “in loco parentis” to provide support as well as discipline for new students. In 1948, to connect all the professionals in the growing area of orientation, the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA) held its first conference in Columbus, Ohio. This organization provides early student affairs professionals’ opportunities to exchange experiences and formalize their processes with other professionals. In the 1960s and

1970s, orientation programs moved from singular events to campus wide initiatives. As programs grew, the need for specialized research of orientation programs grew as well. NODA created the Databank in 1979 to adhere to this issue. The Databank serves as an annual summary of data concerning orientation, transition, and retention programs. The information allowed for professional to support their programs with current research and allow them to make evidence-based decisions. In addition, NODA served as one of the founding members of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education; Ward-Roof, 2010). The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (2003) was designed to provide a platform for the student affairs profession to set standards of practice comparable to those that disciplinary associations and accrediting bodies have established for academic programs. CAS standards provided orientation professional a rubric to create, modify, and evaluate their orientation programs.

Orientation programs provide new students and their families the first steps to transition into college life. Orientation is a process, not a standalone program (Masterson, 2017). The Association for Orientation, Transition and Retention in Higher Education (NODA) defines orientation as, “deliberate programmatic and service efforts designed to facilitate the transition of new students to the institution; prepare students for the institutions educational opportunities and student responsibilities; initiate the integration of new students into the intellectual, cultural, and social climate of the institution; and support the parents, partners, guardians, and children of the new student” (NODA, 2018 para 1). Orientation programs also support parents, transfer, graduate, and non-traditional students. The structure of an orientation program can vary in structure, such as one day,



weeklong (welcome week), online, two-day summer sessions, first-year seminar course, or early communications to incoming students. Mullendore and Banahan (2005) discuss that orientation programs are essential to the success of a new student within the first year. Orientation programs provide institutions a key opportunity to introduce new students to campus traditions, academic standards, faculty engagement, peer interaction, and institutional values. Administrators realize the importance of programming around the needs of new students and families, rather the needs of the institution. Overall, the orientation experience was purposed to create a sense of fit and belonging for the new students. Research shows students require that sense of belonging, if not they leave the institution no matter how well they are performing academically (Ward-Roof, 2010). A successful orientation program should take a multifaceted approach to transition students, which adheres to the needs of the student's personal as well as academic development.

One of the greatest impacts of orientation programs (aside from first-year social and academic involvement) is the direct connection to new student retention. In Tinto's research, his model promoted the concept of interaction between student and institution within the transition to and through the first year. New student orientation is the initiation of that transition. Retention is the academic progression of a student from the first year to the second year (NODA, 2012). Higher retention rates are considered a natural byproduct of academic and social integration, which is implemented through new student orientation. Mullendore and Banahan (2005) discuss that orientation programs can provide institutions with formal and informal data to enhance first-year retention. This is done by providing administrators clear understanding of the academic and social needs of the incoming class through assessing the student experience during orientation.

Institutions continue to realize that orientation is the prime opportunity for their campus entities to communicate their functions and resources to new students and families. An earlier understanding of these resources to ensure a successful transition for new students, as well as retaining these students past their first year. Masterson (2017) states,

“a stronger orientation can help lead to better student success and welfare — reinforces what many college administrators say that a freshmen’s initial experience on campus is among the most important parts of their college education” (p. 7).

Retention and student success continue to drive the implementation of orientation programming. As institutions look for comprehensive and strategic ways to impact student success, the historic nature of orientation programming is affected. In the past, orientation programming focused on the transactional elements of the enrollment process, class registration, housing placement, etc.; but now needs to focus more on building relationships with new students. Masterson (2017) states that the emotional adjustment to college life for new students is the main goal of orientation programming. Students are retained more effectively if they are connected to the institution and their peers. The transactional elements have their importance, but orientation professionals can utilize technology to provide many of those services. With the growing focus of online education, new technology would need to be effectively utilized to provide those students an initiative orientation experience outside of the traditional brick and mortar experience. The funding structure of orientation programming continue to be a point of discussion. Many orientation programs are fee based to ensure programs are self-sustaining (auxiliary), this may change with the constant scrutiny of the overall cost of higher

education. College and universities demographics continue to change with the increased numbers of minority students and student from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Institutions need to utilize orientation creatively to provide these different populations a sense of belonging and support from the broader campus culture. Lastly, the education focus needs to be increased to meet the legislatively mandated content to new students and families. Topics such as sexual assault, domestic violence, mental health, racial discrimination, and gender / sexuality need to be introduced through orientation programs (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2018). It is important to equip student leaders in educating new students on sensitive topics to ensure peer learning is taking place (Masterson, 2017).

### **HBCUs Past and Present**

This section provides a broad overview of HBCUs. The section provides insight on current practices at HBCUs to increase retention. In addition, the section provides clear context on current enrollment and retention trends at HBCUs. Understanding these trends sheds light on the phenomenon of African American retention in lieu of financial, social, and legislative restrictions.

**Historical background.** The Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended, defined an HBCU as: “...any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary [of Education] to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered or is, according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation” (U.S. Department of Education, 1991, p. 1). The history of the HBCU is

one of determination, perseverance, access, and innovation in higher education. Cheyney University of Pennsylvania is considered the first HBCU in the nation, which was founded in 1837 (Mfume, 2016). The next institutions founded to serve African American populations were Lincoln University of Pennsylvania (1854) and Wilberforce University in Ohio (1856). Many of the early HBCUs focused mainly on elementary and secondary education. After early 1900s, HBCUs started to offer postsecondary degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). After the conclusion of the Civil War, newly freed slaves needed opportunities for education and employment. After slavery was abolished, approximately 4.4 million African Americans were now freed, but an estimated 19% were illiterate (Crewe, 2017). The Freedman's Bureau was the first attempt from the United States government to provide educational opportunities for newly freed slaves during the reconstruction era. Next, the Morrill land-grant Act of 1862 provided funding for states to create colleges with focus of the, "liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions in life" (p. 247) (Brooks & Marcus, 2015). Many of those institutions transitioned from their initial focus to the science and engineering programs around the late 1800s. States were provided 30,000 acres of federal land based on the number of representative and senators in Congress (Bracey, 2017). Many southern states still barred African Americans from admittance into their land grant institutions. The Second Morrill Act was established in 1890, one of the changes was the creation of "separate but equal" education for many newly freed Blacks. This act provided additional funding to states to support more agricultural and engineering instruction. Funding was restricted if these land grant institutions prohibited admissions for specific groups of people (i.e. newly freed slaves). States with segregation

policies (mainly southern states) were required to create a separate land grant institution for Blacks if a White land grant institution was present in the state. Prior to this legislature many of the early HBCUs were privately funded. With the passing of the Second Morrill Act, sixteen newly established HBCUs were founded for the education of colored people only (Mfume, 2016). These early HBCUs did not offer many college level courses but created programs focused on the areas of agriculture, mechanics, and industrial subjects. The idea for many state lawmakers was to restrict the education of African Americans to merely vocational occupations. Even though states were required to create equal Black schools to their land grant counterparts, many public HBCUs received 26 times less state funding from legislators (Bracey, 2017). The next major legislature to prevent HBCUs was the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson U.S. Supreme Court decision. This court decision had various implications to HBCUs aside from upholding the notions of “separate but equal” education for Blacks. With changes to elementary and secondary education, this caused HBCUs to focus on college level content. In addition, it created an increased need for Black educators to teach in these segregated schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). Some stipulations included: (a) states must provide education for Blacks as soon as it was available for White (b) Blacks were supposed to receive equal treatment and (c) a state must provide comparable facilities for White and Black students (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). In 1954, the decision in Brown v. Board Education had deemed “separate but equal” unconstitutional and lead to the desegregation of schools. HBCUs still had unequal funding supporting from federal and state governments and some institutions closed or merged with other institutions. Black students continue to enroll into HBCUs despite the Brown v. Board of Education

decision. Ten years later, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 would look to remedy the slow progression of desegregation and create opportunities for equality among federally funded education programs. Title VI first penalized the 19 remaining states who still practiced segregation in their education programs and created the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) to enforce that mission. This affected HBCUs along with their PWI counterparts. Many of them had to desegregate as well. Title VI ensured that HBCUs developed better academic programs and facilities, while having HBCUs offer high demand programs unavailable at other state system institutions. Title III of the Higher Education Act of 1965 provided federal funds for the enhancement of HBCUs. Many HBCUs rely on that federal funding to service their students.

**HBCUs in the 21st century.** Esters and Strayhorn (2013) discussed the shared missions of HBCUs focus on serving people, serving the underserved and promoting racial uplift and empowerment. In spite of the monumental impact of HBCUs throughout their 150 years of existence, the question of their relevancy continues to permeate conversations within higher education. Many times, these conversations lack factual data and statistics to encourage an authentic dialogue. Based on the research, there are definitely areas of improvement that does not discount the impeccable work that is being done at these resourceful institutions especially within the area of retention. Dr. Michael Lomax, President of the United Negro College Fund states that, “HBCUs outperform non-HBCU institutions in retaining and graduating first-generation, low-income African American students” (Lomax, 2018, page 1). HBCUs have grown beyond educating freed slaves and now impact the educational growth of diverse populations throughout our nation.

HBCUs have achieved remarkable success in educating a sizable percentage of students, specifically African American students, despite of more than a century of inadequate funding by federal and state legislators (Walton, 2011; Green, 2004). There are currently 101 HBCUs within the United States, with a majority of those institutions being located in the south. Even though HBCUs make up 3% of the total higher education institutions, they still produce 25% of the African Americans attaining undergraduate degrees (Knight, Davenport, Green-Powell, & Hilton, 2012). In 2016, 15% of first professional degrees, 16% of master's degrees, and 10% of doctorates awarded to African Americans students from HBCUs (Farmer et al., 2019). Many hypothesize that HBCUs only educate African American students, this narrative is false, based on research from National Center for Education Statistics (2017) that non-Black students make up 24% of HBCU enrollment. Some HBCUs such as Bluefield State College and State University of West Virginia have White student populations above 80% of the total population since 1960 (Hinton, 2014). In 2013, HBCUs awarded 41% of bachelor's degrees in biological sciences, 35% in computer sciences, 32% in mathematical sciences, 47% in physical sciences, and 22% in engineering (Esters & Strayhorn, 2013; Perna, Gasman, Gary, Lundy, Wagner, Drezner, 2010). Approximately 50% of African American teachers and 70% of African American dentists are a graduate of HBCUs (Knight et al., 2012). Reports from the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) confer that 50% of Black engineers, 50% of Black attorneys, and 50% of Black physicians are products of HBCUs (Gasman & Arroyo, 2014). Howard University and Meharry Medical College are responsible for 19.7% of Black graduates within the areas of medicine and dentistry (Johnson, 2017). Xavier University of Louisiana (Gasman & Nguyen, 2016) is

responsible for sending the most Black graduates to medical school, while comparatively Florida A&M University and North Carolina A&T State University are responsible for producing successful engineers and business professionals, respectively (Johnson, 2017).

HBCUs have a substantial impact on the nation's overall economy. HBCUs creates approximately \$14.8 billion of revenue within their local and regional economies (Lenoir, 2017). In regard to employment opportunities, HBCUs are strong employers with 134,090 jobs within local and regional areas. HBCUs also generate economic power for their graduates after matriculating. HBCU graduates can expect earn to 56% more than if they did not have an HBCU degree (Lenoir, 2017). Research discusses that HBCUs and their graduates are responsible for Black economic growth and the development of the Black middle class (Gasman & Arroyo, 2014). These institutions consistently educate a significant majority of African Americans who obtain college degrees. Research has displayed that HBCU graduates achieve higher status and occupations while reporting greater satisfaction with their jobs (Strayhorn, 2008a; 2008b; Esters & Strayhorn, 2013).

**HBCU enrollment.** Historically, the mission of HBCUs focused on to providing quality education for African Americans during times of segregation. Around the time of the Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), 90% of all African Americans within American higher education were enrolled at HBCUs. Today, HBCUs still uphold the mission of educating African Americans but have expanded that mission to include other diverse populations to increase their enrollment. Similar to their PWI counterparts. HBCUs have focused their enrollment effort in supporting Latino/students, which has yielded a 90% increase since the start of the 21st century (Farmer et al., 2019; Palmer et



al., 2015). White students make up 13% of all HBCU populations and Asian American students make up 1% (Farmer et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2015). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), 76% of HBCU student attend, public institutions with the remaining 24% attend private nonprofit institutions. In addition, female enrollment continues to surpass male enrollment with 67% of HBCU population comprised of female students.

The retention and persistence of students continues to be a major factor affecting all HBCUs campuses. The factors affecting some HBCU campuses retention can be linked to (a) outside employment for students, (b) curriculum issues, (c) lower academic performance, (d) inadequate teaching methods, and (e) self – advisement of courses that result in insufficient prerequisites (Hinton, 2014). HBCUs considered their mission to continue to provide academic access for large percentages of low socioeconomic, Pell Grant recipients, and first-generation students with lower college entrance exam scores (Langley, 2017). For example, 42% of HBCU student come from families with an annual income less than 25,000 dollars (Hinton, 2014). Farmer (2019) states that, “retention is dynamic and involves a complex interplay between academic and non-academic factors”. By creating nurturing and supportive environment for their students, HBCUs address the academic and non –academic factors affecting their students. Many Black and African American students consider their overall environment at HBCUs to be a key factor in their satisfaction, which affects their persistence and retention (Famer, 2019). Despite some negative perspectives, many HBCUs are creating and developing innovative ways to combat negative retention rates. Many HBCUs are seeing positive results connected to their retention efforts, even though their rates are below their PWI counterparts. The

focus of this study highlights and examines some of these proactive and successful practices.

### **Retention Overview**

This section provides information on the impact of retention on the higher education landscape. It provides on how it is measured. The section provides information on the unique issues concerning the retention of African American students. The section also shed light on current practices that create positive impact on retention rates.

**College student retention.** The conversation of persistence and retention continues to be a central point in the contemporary dialogue around the effectiveness of higher education. In 2004, only half of first year students matriculated to graduation (Demetriou & Schmitz - Sciborski, 2011). The contemporary view of college retention suggests that the combination of individual and institutional factors influences a student to persist, transfer, or completely withdraw from an institution (Flowers, 2004). Many students do not progress after their first-year due to such factors as college readiness issues, financial issues, personal problems, as well as feeling no sense of belonging (Field, 2018). To combat retention and graduation issues, many states have adopted funding policies connected to the performance of college and universities due to reduced funding at the federal level. These performance-based funding policies link state appropriations to institutional results such as a number of conferred degrees, student retention, and transfer rates instead of enrollment rates (Hillman et al., 2015). Policymakers insist that these measures motivates colleges and universities to focus increased attention on degree completion and retaining of students (Hillman et al., 2015). Retention is a primary metric to measure student achievement and experience within the

first year and is connected to graduation rates (Bingham & Solverson, 2016). Retention is defined as, “student progression through higher education, focusing primarily on student persistence, i.e., term to term through the beginning of the second year at the same institution, with the goal being graduation from that institution and/or achievement of personal educational objectives” (NODA, 2018 pg. 1).

The early perspective of retention focused mainly on the characteristics and qualities of students and their interaction with their college environment (Othman, 2016). Berger discussed that the early retention theories focus more so on the psychological perspective than the sociological (Othman, 2016). In the 1930s, retention was defined as “student mortality,” which focused on students’ failure to graduate (Demetriou & Schmitz-Sciborski, 2011). By the 1970s, retention research began to reflect on the institutional responsibility on the retention and persistence of their students. In 1975, Vincent Tinto developed the student integration model, which is the foundation of current retention commentary and research. Tinto became one of the early theorists to adopt, create, and develop a true student retention model. Tinto theorized that the main forces that guide student persistence was academic integration and social integration (Gray & Swinton, 2017). If a student’s motivation and academic ability do not align with the institution’s academic programs or student involvement opportunities, the student mostly likely does not persist (Gray & Swinton, 2017). The main theoretical concepts that guided Tinto’s work were the sociological suicide theory (Durkheim), the tribal rites of passage theories (Van Gennep), and employee turnover from the field of human resources (Othman, 2016). The current era of retention focuses on the holistic development of students and campuses operating as connected communities to engage

first-year students. Students who interact with a concerned individual, such as faculty, staff, advisors, peers, administrators) are influenced to remain at the institution (Demetriou & Schmitz - Sciborksi, 2011). Early connections within personal, academic, and support services centers allow students to effectively to navigate institutional culture, meet expectations, and matriculate to graduation (Tinto, 2006; Demetriou & Schmitz - Sciborksi, 2011). Many of these connective opportunities are initially introduced to students through orientation programming.

Based on the students who enrolled in college for the first time in fall 2016, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2018) provided data indicating that 73.9% of student persisted to their second year, while 61.6% were retained at their initial institution. Based on race and ethnicity, Asian students had the highest retention rate at 85.3%, while Black, Hispanic, and White students' retention rates were 67.0%, 70.7%, and 78.6% respectively (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Black & African Americans had the lowest retention rate among all racial groups. The retention rates for remaining with the starting institution for Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White students are 73.4%, 67%, 70.7%, and 78.6% respectively. The focus of this research is to understand the factors contribute to low Black and African American rates as well as examine HBCUs with above average retention rates for this racial demographic.

**African American retention issues.** The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center reported that 67% of African American students persisted to their sophomore year, which was the lowest among the major ethnic groups; Asian – 85.3%, White – 78.6%, and Hispanic -70.7% (NSC, 2018). The retention of African American students was one of the greater challenges in higher education (Hinton, 2014). Despite

the lower rates of Black student retention, there is an absence of research that analyzed and synthesized the literature connection to Black student retention (Flowers, 2004). The retention rates of African American college students are significantly lower in comparison to their White counterparts (Brezinski, 2016; Grier-Reed, 2010). Racial discrimination and retention for African American students are connected and influence their overall college experience (Brezinski, 2016). Jones (2002) stated that new college students have criticisms of their campuses lack of diversity at predominately White institutions. Researchers have noted that studying the relationship between race/ethnicity, along with family support, and retention is important due to the different life experiences undergraduate minority students have in comparison to White students (Brezinski, 2016). Factors that significantly influence African American student retention are in the areas of academics, finances, social connection, and personal issues (Brezinski, 2016). In 2010, only 13.3% of African Americans ages 25 and older obtained bachelor's degrees, and only 6.5% obtained an advanced degree (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; Phillips-Nelson, 2014). Based on research from the United Negro College Fund, African American males have the lowest completion rate at 40% (Bridges, 2018). The HBCUs provide innovative and strategic opportunities to combat these disparaging percentages. There are several research studies on retention of African Americans, but minimal research based on the effective orientation strategies of HBCUs to generate a sense of the impact of belonging to impact retention of these students.

**Best practices for retention.** The key factors to increasing student retention are interactions with campus community representatives, such as staff, faculty, community partners, and peers, as well as successful student integration into the social and academic

areas of their campus (Astin 1993; Howard & Flora, 2015; Tinto, 2002). Orientation programming serves as the initial opportunity for students to experience that integration to their new campus culture. Kuh argued that students who attend orientation programs have better grades and higher graduation rates (Hundrieser & Voigt, 2008). Vincent Tinto's research discussed the importance of connecting with student within the first-year from the institutional perspective by providing support, connecting academic support to everyday learning, effective assessment, and engaging students on learning, Orientation is an essential tool for student recruitment, acculturation and retention (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2018; Jacobs, 2003). New student orientations help students maneuver the campus, interpret educational programs, foster opportunities for connection with peers, examine campus culture and its social norms, and utilize successful academic practices (Murphy, 2013).

### **Seminal Study on the Impact of Orientation**

The 2017 study by Michigan State University provides context on the positive impact of orientation programming on retention. The study provides a clear quantitative view from the perspective of students on impact of orientation. It also provides information on the African American perspective of orientation programming.

**Michigan State University – orientation program.** Michigan State University conducted quantitative research study to understand the connection of orientation program and retention. The study discovered that the ability to “fit in” lead to higher academic achievement and increase the student's interest in continuing at the institution (Prasad et al., 2017). The study reviewed 1,935 surveys from freshmen students who transitioned through new student orientation. The study reviewed the parallels between

student retention and employee turnover. In case of employee turnover, the research focused more on why employees stay with a focus on how they become “embedded” an organization. In the case of Michigan State University, the researchers were applying the ideas of “embeddedness” to the university setting and understanding new student orientation’s influence on the idea. The study found that a sense of embeddedness prior to a student matriculating influenced their attitude toward attrition. In addition, the connection between embeddedness and attrition was increasing dramatic among minority students (Prasad et al., 2017). Lastly, a student perception of their fit within an institutional prior to matriculation greatly influences their academic attitude and thoughts concerning attrition.

**Embeddedness.** Embeddedness has been described as, “a collection of factors that are both organization-related and community-related that act to ‘embed’ or tie people to particular settings” (Prasad et al., 2017). Early research of embeddedness focused on organization development and how an individual employee perceives their fit within an organization. It provided explanation on why employees stayed committed to organizations for long periods of time or quickly exited organizations. In addition, this research was utilized in understanding employee turnover and overall employee performance. Embeddedness focuses on the influence of an environment on an individual which differs from other social constructs. In the area of student retention, embeddedness is perceived within three dimensions which are links (person links to others and activities), fits (compared similarities between the community and the individual’s life spaces), and sacrifice (ease in which links are broken) (Prasad et al., 2017). Conversations of embeddedness have created a counter narrative to normal retention

discussions. Instead of focusing on the internal experience affecting student attrition, embeddedness adds the perception of external factors effecting a student. In the case of college students, fit refers to a student's perceived compatibility to their university and how a university programmatically responds to that perception. Sacrifices examines the student's psychological, social, and monetary loss if they disconnect from their institution. Early familiarity with an organization prior to connecting with that organization can ensure embeddedness for that individual. In the case of students, early connections with an institution to peers within that institution increased the student's feeling of embeddedness to an institution. Prasad stated, "We expect that those pre-entry embeddedness perceptions will relate in the first-year at a university to a student's withdrawal behaviors and cognitions (i.e., attendance and attrition intentions), as well as performance." (Prasad et al., 2017 pg. 27) There is some parallel language between a sense of belonging and embeddedness.

**Limitations of the Prasad study.** The majority of the respondents came from one demographic. As a result, there was a lack of confirmed data connected to the responses of minority students. The researcher spoke of cultural mistrust that African Americans may possess that would create skepticism toward their predominately White institution. The researchers suggested intentional gathering of more minority respondents and creating trust among those respondents. In addition, the study conducted by faculty untrained on orientation practices and standards. There was not narrative on the specific of the orientation program structure, implementation, and impact.

The literature currently provides information about orientation programming from the student perspective. The student perspective provides insight on primarily their



satisfaction with orientation programming. This perspective does not provide insight on best practices to develop orientation programs. In addition, majority of the experiences are within PWI environment. There is much research on the retention of African American students but usually in the PWI space. There is a gap in the literature from the perspective of the professionals who coordinate orientation programming. In addition, there is a gap in the literature concerning orientation programming within HBCU environments.

### **Research Question**

This study was guided by one central research questions question. The central research question: What are orientation professionals' perceptions of orientation programming at a public HBCU on the transition and retention of first-year students?

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provides understanding on the framework that drives orientation programs and current studies that discuss such programs. These theories provide little contemporary information on how they impact the African American student experience (aside from theories from Cross and Strayhorn). The chapter also provides historical context of the HBCUs and their influence in regard to African American student success. The Michigan State University study provides evidence of the positive impact of orientation on student retention. The study is limited in the perspective of professionals who can provide best practices on how the programs are developed. In addition, the student is limited in the nuances of how a sense of belonging was created for their African American students. A clear understanding of those nuances would provide clearer answers to the problem of African American student retention. It also only

provides perspective from a large public university. A study of HBCU orientation programs can provide data in both those areas.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Aim of Study**

The purpose of the study was to understand orientation professionals' perceptions of orientation programming at a public HBCU on the successful transition and retention of first-year students. Chapter 1 presented the problem, purpose of the study, background information, research deficiencies, possible participants, research questions, theoretical framework, audience, and significant of the study. In Chapter 2, the review of the relevant literature displayed the importance of orientation programming in creating a sense of belonging and impacting retention. The review of the relevant literature revealed substantial gaps on the subject of orientation impact in HBCU settings, and their influence on African American retention. Chapter 3 consists of an overview of the research most aligned to the central research question. The chapter includes the central research question used in the study. The chapter provides information on population and sampling. In addition, information on geographical location, interview protocol, data analysis, and quality measures. Lastly, the chapter discusses ethical considerations, procuring consent, and measures to ensure confidentiality.

This study was guided by one central research question. The central research question is: What are orientation professionals' perceptions of orientation programming at a public HBCU on the transition and retention of first-year students?

Answering the research questions provides insight of the connections between orientation programs and retention at public HBCUs. It also sheds light on the participant's perception of their program within retention efforts on their campus.

## **Qualitative Research Approach**

Qualitative research describes a problem that can be interpreted through concept or phenomenon exploration (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research considers the human as an instrument. The focus of qualitative research promotes the understanding of the participant's experience and reflection on those experiences (Jackson, 2007). Qualitative practices of inquiry focus developing prominent questions and procedures, inductive inquiry, and interpretation of the meaning of the data (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research was appropriate for this study because the goal is to utilize the orientation coordinators to discuss their experiences with developing programs and understand how they perceive their programs making an impact. Especially since these coordinators implement programs that operate at successful institutions that are successful in retention of African American students.

Qualitative research was appropriate because of the distinct role the researcher played in the study. Starman (2013) stated that the subjective views of a researcher were vital in the results of a study. In the case of this study, the researcher had adequate knowledge and practical experiences in the coordination and implementation of orientation programs. Qualitative research asserts that knowledge and meaning is gained from human experiences, such as the researcher experience working in orientation (von Glasersfeld, 1990; Lewis, 2011).

Qualitative research was an appropriate methodology to answer the central research question because its approach creates understanding of a process by which events and actions take place (Maxwell 1996; Lewis, 2011). A successful orientation that positively impacts retention is a comprehensive process rather than a single event

(Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). The orientation of a new student can start at the stage of admittance and continue to the completion of the first year. The orientation coordinators are pivotal sources of data because they coordinate, develop, and implement the process first-year students undertake transitioning to a new institution.

### **Appropriateness of Design**

A qualitative multiple case study was used as the research design and method in this study. Case studies allow research to analyze specific programs, activities, or events which occur in a single or multiple situations (cases) (Creswell, 2014). In regard to this study, the researcher analyzed orientation from the perspective of orientation professionals on multiple campuses. A phenomenological approach was not appropriate here because it focuses on the lived experiences of an individual. Even though the professionals provided personal insights in it was in reference to orientation programming. A narrative approach is not appropriate because the study is not focused on the overall lives of the participants outside of their involvement in orientation programming. Ethnography is not being utilized because the research did not conduct observations of orientation programs just catalog data collected through interviews. Grounded theory was not used because theory is not the focal point of the study, the perceptions of the participants is the focal point. The interpretative pattern, constructivism, and phenomenological perspective as an archetypal basis of qualitative research are closely linked to the definition and characteristics of case studies (Starman, 2013).

**Case study design.** Case studies are a method of qualitative research. Case studies are used frequently in *practice-oriented fields* such as social work, management,

education, and public administration (Starman, 2013). Yin (2009) suggested utilizing a case study when the researcher wants to gain deeper understanding of a real-life phenomenon but the connection between context and phenomena are not clearly apparent. In the case of this study, public HBCUs are reporting above average retention rate and the researcher wants to provide context on how early transition programs (i.e. orientation programs) impact this phenomenon. Case studies are commonly used in higher education research. Yin (2009) stated that a case study should be considered when: (a) the aim of the research is to answer “how” and “why” questions; (b) you cannot influence the behavior of the participants involved in the study; (c) you want to examine contextual conditions because you believe they are connected to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear understood between the phenomenon and context (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case study research is appropriate for orientation because it is a series of events that create an overall experience for new students and their families. The individual events cannot be separated from the context of the experience. That experience directly influences the decision of a new student to continue at an institution (retention).

According to Yin (2009), case study research is based on constructivist paradigm. Constructivist consider truth relative and dependent in the individual experience of the person. An advantage of this approach is, it allows the participant to tell their story while creating a collaboration between the researcher and participant. The understanding of the coordinator’s perspective provides a deeper understanding than a student experience. The student experience can only provide insight on one experience. A coordinator can provide historical and institutional evidence of the program. Additionally, a coordinator can

provide feedback based on assessments from multiple stakeholders. The coordinator can provide observational data on their student leadership, which operates as agents within the program. Lastly, the coordinator can provide comparative knowledge and experience connected to larger associations (i.e. NODA, NASPA, and ACPA) that drives the research on this topic. The stories of participants provide the researcher understanding of the participants “reality” and their actions (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The case study inquiry deals with the fact that there are more variables of interest than data points in a situation. This allows the phenomenon to be studied from multiple facets (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The orientation process has various data points. Not only are there various programs, events, and interactions within the process but multiple stakeholders as well. The study focused on the programmatic impact on student retention; however, faculty, staff, external supporters, and administrators can provide evidence of the experience as well. The individual who would have the most access and experience to those various data points is the orientation coordinator.

In this study, the goal is to understand how the orientation program is implemented at a HBCU with high retention. By engaging the program coordinators, the research data can provide in depth information on the various elements of their programs that lead to retention. It provided answers to the perceived connection between the programmatic elements and the success of first-year students.

### **Identifying High Retention Institutions**

The U.S. News & World Report produces an annual list of yearly based on the top performing colleges across the nation. The U.S. News & World Report also creates a ranking of the top performing HBCUs across the nation based on the U.S. Department of

Education designation. The 2018 U.S. News & World Report served as a guide to identify HBCUs with above average African American retention rates. The report defined a HBCU as “any historically Black college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black people, and that is accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association determined by the Secretary of Education to be a reliable authority as to the quality of training offered, or is according to such an agency or association, making reasonable progress toward accreditation” (U.S. News & World Report, 2018). All institutions included in the rankings are listed on the U.S. Department of Education registry (Brooks & Morris, 2015). The ranking indicators are student retention, faculty resources, student selectivity, financial resources, alumni giving, and assessment by administrators at peer institutions (U.S. News & World Report, 2018; Brooks & Morris, 2017).

Unlike the national listings of colleges, the HBCU rankings include peer assessments are produced by other HBCU administrators. The researcher focused on the top public universities within the top 25 percentile. The researcher focused on public universities due to access to intuitional information. The U.S. News & World Report gathers data from Council for Aid to Education and National Center for Education Statistics to ensure accuracy.

The researcher focused on the top of public universities within the top 25 percentile. The researcher focused on public universities due to easier access to intuitional information. Based on the list in the rankings, the researcher reviewed each institution’s first-year retention rate and identified the institutions above the national average. The national average for first-year retention in the United States is



approximately 74%. Based on the data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), the national retention average for 4-year public institutions are 81%. The average retention rate for open access institutions, which many HBCUs fit this criterion, is 62%. The retention rate is 96% for more selective public institutions. The researcher focused on institutions above the 67% national retention average of African American students.

- Public HBCUs ranked on the U.S. News & World Report. All retention rates were verified through the College Navigator function via the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)/Integrated Post-Secondary System (IPED).
  - Florida A & M University ranked #6, with a retention rate of 83%
    - Florida A & M University and Tuskegee University are both ranked at #6 but Tuskegee University is a private HBCU
  - North Carolina A&T State University is ranked #8, with a retention rate of 75%
  - North Carolina Central University is ranked #13, with a retention rate of 81%
    - North Carolina Central University and Delaware State University are both ranked at #13 but North Carolina Central University has a higher retention rate
  - Delaware State University is ranked #13, with a retention rate of 75%
  - Jackson State University is ranked #15, with a retention rate of 71%
  - Morgan State University is ranked #16, with a retention rate of 70%
    - Morgan State University and Clark – Atlanta University are both ranked at #16 but Clark – Atlanta University is a private HBCU

- Alcorn State University is ranked #19, with a retention rate of 72%
- Bowie State University is ranked #22, with a retention rate of 75%
- Prairie View A&M University is ranked #25, with a retention rate of 69%

Prairie View A&M University and Bethune – Cookman University are both ranked at #25 but Bethune – Cookman University is a private HBCU.

### **Institutional Background Overview**

This section provides a brief history and key demographic information concerning the institution's population size.

**Florida A&M University.** Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University (FAMU) was originally named the State Normal College for Colored Students when the institution was founded on October 3, 1887. Located in Tallahassee (FL), the institution is the only historically Black institution in the State University System of Florida. In 1884, state legislator, Thomas Van Renssaler Gibbs, was instrumental in the passing the House Bill 133. This bill was the foundation legislature that established a White normal school in Gainesville and a Black college in Jacksonville. The institution would later move from Jacksonville to Tallahassee. The institution would receive \$7,500 in 1891 to become Florida's only land grant institution for Black people. FAMU boasts of its offering over 60 bachelor's degrees and 40 graduate degrees for their total population of 7,769 (U.S. New & World Report, 2018). The institutional vision statement is "Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) will be recognized as a premier land-grant, doctoral-research university that produces globally competitive graduates (Florida A&M University, n.d.)".

**North Carolina A&T State University.** North Carolina A &T State University (NCAT) is a land grant, doctoral/research institution with a foundational history in civil right with a persistent focus in the area of STEM. Notably in 1960, the Greensboro Four who staged the first sit in were students of NCAT. NCAT was founded in 1891 and current boasts a population of 9,968 students. Business and Engineering are the two most prominent academic programs at the institution. The school’s mission is “North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University advances knowledge through scholarly exchange and transforms society with exceptional teaching, learning, discovery, and community engagement. An 1890 land-grant doctoral research institution with a distinction in STEM and commitment to excellence in all disciplines, North Carolina A & T creates innovative solutions that address the challenges and economic needs of North Carolina, the nation and the world “(North Carolina A&T State University, n.d.).

**Delaware State University.** Delaware State University (DSU) is located in Dover, DE, with a total population of 4,600 students. The original school’s name was Delaware College for Colored Students when it was founded in 1891 as a state land grant institution (U.S. News & World Report, 2018). In 1893, the school name changed to State College for Colored Students to avoid confusion with University of Delaware (which was then named Delaware College). In 1993, the institution would acquire its current name of Delaware State University. The institution academic focus has historically been in the areas of STEM with two institution owned farms in areas of Kenton and Smyrna. DSU is one of the only HBCUs with its aviation program (Airway Science Program) and its own fleet of airplanes. DSU boasts the only accredited bachelor’s and master’s program in the state of Delaware. The DSU mission is to

“purposefully integrate the highest standards of excellence in teaching, research and service in its baccalaureate, masters, and doctoral programs. Its commitment is to advance science, technology, and liberal arts. The professions produce capable and productive leaders who contribute to the sustainability and economic development of the global community” (DSU, n.d.).

**North Carolina Central University.** North Carolina Central University (NCCU) is located in Durham, North Carolina in the heart of the Research Triangle of Durham, Raleigh, and Chapel Hill. The student population is 8,097 with most student majoring in Criminal Justice, Business, and Psychology. NCCU was originally founded by Dr. James Edward Shepard, and was first named the National Religious Training School and Chautauqua. NCCU is the first public liberal arts school dedicated to educating African Americans in the United States. NCCU also was the first UNC system institution to require 120 hours of community service before each student graduates. In addition, it is the second HBCU to create a LGBTQA Center (NCCU, n.d.). The institutional mission is, “North Carolina Central University, with a strong tradition of teaching, research, and service, prepares students to become global leaders and practitioners who transform communities. Through a nationally recognized law school, highly acclaimed and innovative programs in visual and performing arts, sciences, business, humanities, and education programs, NCCU students are engaged problem solvers. Located in the Research Triangle, the University advances research in the biotechnological, biomedical, informational, computational, behavioral, social, and health sciences. Our students enhance the quality of life of citizens and the economic development of North Carolina, the nation, and the world “(NCCU, n.d.).

**Jackson State University.** Jackson State University (JSU) mission is, “(JSU) produces technologically-advanced, diverse, ethical, global leaders who think critically, address societal problems and compete effectively” (JSU, n.d.). JSU is the 4<sup>th</sup> largest public institution in the state of Mississippi (JSU, 2018). JSU total population is 8,558 with the majority of student within the College of Education & Human Development 2,112, and the College of Science, Engineering, & Technology 2,311 (JSU, n.d.). The original site of the institution was in Natchez, MS but moved to Jackson, MS in 1882. The school was created by American Baptist Home mission Society in 1887 to development Christian leaders of color. The institution was designated a university in 1974 and Urban University of the State of Mississippi in 1979. Today, JSU is public HBCU funded by federal funds, grants, and student fees. JSU motto is, “Challenging Minds. Changing Lives”.

**Morgan State University.** Morgan State University is located in Baltimore, MD and is designated Maryland’s “Preeminent Public Urban Research University” (Coleman, 2017). MSU was founded by Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1867 and officially was named Morgan State University College after Rev. Lyttleton F. Morgan in 1890. The first name for MSU was Centenary Biblical Institute. MSU has a student population of 7,700 with the vision of “educating a culturally diverse and multi-racial population with a particular obligation to increasing the educational attainment of the African-American population in fields and at degree levels in which it is underrepresented” (MSU, n.d.). MSU grants the most bachelor’s degree to African American students in the state of Maryland and his nationally ranked for Blacks receiving

doctoral degrees (MSU, n.d.). MSU is a founding member of the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC) (MSU, n.d.).

**Alcorn State University.** Alcorn State University (ASU) was founded in 1871 and named after the Mississippi governor, James L. Alcorn. ASU is the oldest public, land grant HBCU whose original mission was to educate former slaves. ASU is located in Lorman, MS with an undergraduate student population of 2,285. In 1878, ASU became Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College, which exclusively educated male students. The first residence hall built for women was in 1902, which allowed the curriculum to expand to serve female students. ASU vision is to “become a premier comprehensive land-grant university. It will develop diverse students into globally competitive leaders and apply scientific research, through collaborative partnerships that benefit the surrounding communities, states, nation, and world” (ASU, n.d.).

**Bowie State University.** Bowie State University (BSU) was founded in 1865 as the oldest HBCU in Maryland with a continued focus on connecting under-served population with academic opportunities in higher education. The legacy of BSU started with the vision of the Baltimore Association for the Moral and Educational Improvement of the Colored People, which focused on the education of recently freed slaves. Originally the Baltimore Normal School and the Board of Education took control of the institution in 1908 and moved the school to Bowie in 1910. After several transitions, BSU gained university status in 1988 and became a prominent institution in the area of STEM. BSU prides itself on producing a significant percentage of African Americans in the field of education and technology. The total student population is 6,148 and BSU is

located in the suburban area of Bowie, MD. BSU's vision "is committed to preparing students for success in a highly technological, global society" (BSU, n.d.).

**Prairie View A&M University.** Prairie View A & M University (PVAMU) is a public HBCU founded in 1876 with an undergraduate population of 7,455. PVAMU's mission is "it seeks to invest in program and services that address issues and challenges affecting the diverse ethnic and socioeconomic population of Texas and the larger society including the global arena "(Prairie View A & M University, n.d.). Located in a rural setting, the institutional vision is to influence the different social economic levels in Texas while developing diverse populations to be successful in a global environment.

### **Identification of Participants**

The researcher used purposeful sampling to identify the participants for the study. Purposeful sampling focuses on selecting cases that yield pivotal information that can provide the researcher with insight and understanding of the phenomenon in the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to select participants that are knowledgeable of the phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Palinkas et al. 2015). The focus of purposeful sampling is to maximize efficiency and validity (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The researcher connected with potential participants through public access forums. Initially, the researcher utilized the NODA Directory to find potential participants from each of the identified institutions. The researcher also reviewed institutional websites to identify potential participants with relevant orientation experience. Based on the website directories, these participants may function within an office structure, individual professional, or campus committee depending on the program

structure. The researcher reviewed the website for individuals with the title designation of coordinator, assistant director, or director of new student orientation. In the case that this information is not available, the researcher sent communication through specific public access forums. In addition, the researcher utilized social media platforms such as Group Me, LinkedIn, and Facebook to recruit participants. The researcher sent an email (see Appendix A) to recruit the potential participant. The researcher communicated to potential participants that they are representing their personal experiences and not be representing their institution in an official capacity. Once a response was received from the potential participants, a 30 to 60 minutes introductory phone meeting was coordinated to explain the nature of the study. At this time, the potential participants were asked to confirm that they meet all the inclusion criteria and can confirm or deny their willingness to move forward with the study. The researcher informed the participant that the future interview would be conducted through Zoom or another web-based communication system. If the participant confirmed willingness, the researcher requested specific contact information including mailing address, telephone, and email address to allow the researcher to follow up after study if necessary. This private information was not be included in the study. The participants had the researcher's contact information for questions or if they want to be removed from the study. The participants were provided the contact information for the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board if they have comments, questions, or concerns about the study. Once all participants were identified, the researcher assigned each one a numerical designation. The numerical designator ensured the privacy of the participant and no personal information about the participant is included within the study.



The research sought to schedule 12 to 15 participants for interviews to ensure data saturation was reached. The researcher also utilized a snowball sampling technique to identify other potential participants. Snowballing sampling involves utilizing initial contacted subjects to gather other subjects (actors) (Atkinson and Flint, 2011). In all communications with potential participants, the researcher asked for recommendations of other potential participants who may want to participate in the study.

**Inclusion criteria.** Each individual participant was required to meet the following inclusion criteria to be included in the study: (a) must work directly with orientation programs and have an understanding of the institutions retention initiatives; (b) the orientation program that the participant supervises must be at a public HBCU, special consideration was given to the institution listed in the above section; (c) the participant must have one to two years of experience in their role supporting orientation; (d) must have oversight of the orientation programs; (e) must display availability and willingness to participate as well as be able to communicate their experiences within the phenomenon effectively. This ensured that the participant have observed a full orientation cycle through a full academic year.

### **Instrumentation**

Qualitative researchers operate as the instrument in data collection (Yin, 2009). The data that required for the study were collected through multiple sources. The sources include an Interview Protocol, orientation documentation, and field notes / reflective journal.

**Interview Protocol.** Creswell (2014) stated that an interview protocol is a document created by the researcher to capture information provided by the participant

during an interview. The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview protocol. The 10 interview questions (see Appendix B) are open-ended and developed by researcher to allow for a detailed follow up and probes to ensure that all information is extracted during the interview. The questions were adapted from a qualitative case study that assessed conflict resolution programs in higher education (Garrido, 2015). The questions were designed for the participants to elaborate on their experiences developing the programs and how the programs connect to the onboarding of new students. The questions were designed not to lead the participant in a particular way and, be responded to with more than a one-word responses. Interviews must satisfy two criteria, which are satisfying the line of inquiry as well as being presented in a “friendly” and “nonthreatening manner” (Yin, 2009). The purpose of the interview protocol is to create continuity among all the participants during each interview.

**Field testing the interview protocol.** Field testing is the process where the researcher utilizes potential study participants to test the quality of the interview protocol. Field testing is a common technique used in the development of semi-structured interview protocol (Kallio, et al, 2016). The researcher engaged two individuals in a field test who have experience with orientation programming in the HBCU space. Based on the results of the field test, the researcher reformatted the interview protocol to ensure the questions are practical (Kallio, et al, 2016). Based on the feedback from the individuals, the researcher made adjustments to the interview protocol to ensure effectiveness and intent.

**Documentation.** The researcher reviewed orientation documentation to understand the full structure and process of each institution’s orientation process.

Documents are essential to the researcher because documents can corroborate and support other evidence sources (Yin, 2009). Examples of documentation included items that can be accessed via the institution website such as schedules, website pages, social media campaigns, registration pages, articles, and program videos. Additional documentation was requested from the participants. These can include but not limited to survey information, program proposals, meeting minutes, training schedules, presentations, or other important documents.

**Field notes/reflective journal.** A reflective journal was utilized by the researcher to gather field notes. Field notes allow the researcher to document contextual information during an interview (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). The different types of field notes are jotted notes, direct observations, inference, analysis, interview notes, and personal journal (Neuman, 2011; Deggs & Hernandez, 2018). For this study the researcher utilized jotted notes for short term memory triggers, and interview notes that contain information about interviewee.

### **Data Collection**

The basic feature of qualitative research is the intentional engagement with the participants, data, and setting during the data collection process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The data collection process involves developing research study boundaries, information collection via unstructured or semi structured observations, documents, and protocol for recording information.

**Interview.** Participants were contacted by phone to discuss a time to be interviewed. If phone calls were not answered, the researcher followed up by email to confirm the previously discussed interview details. The interview date and time was

selected based on the participant's availability. The researcher sent a calendar invite to the participant providing electronic confirmation for the interview. The researcher sent a reminder email to the participant that morning. All interviews were conducted through Zoom. This allowed the researcher to record the interview based on the permission of the participant. Since the interview was conducted online, an hour prior to the interview the researcher tested all aspect of the technology system to ensure effectiveness. Once the participant was visible on the screen and responding, the researcher allowed for questions from the participant concerning the study. The researcher reminded the participant that they were speaking from their personal experience and not in any official capacity for their institution. The researcher reminded the participant the final report would not identify any specific individual or any specific institution. The researcher waited for the participant to confirm they understand the previously discussed statement. The researcher ensured the participant had signed the informed consent form before the interview officially began. The researcher asked the participants for permission to record the interview via Zoom. If the answer was no, the researcher did not record via Zoom and took detailed notes based on the participant's response. If the answer was yes, the researcher continued to utilize the Zoom recording as planned. The researcher reminded participant that their involvement is voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. The researcher began by asking basic questions about the participant such as name, position, institution, gender, age, and ethnicity. Once the interview began, the researcher utilized the interview protocol to ask questions and employ the reflective journal to record important field notes. If the responses were unclear or required clarification, the researcher asked probing questions to the participant. Probing involves the use of

specific words or phrase by a researcher to gain clarity on a participant interview response (Lavrakas, 2008). A probing technique was utilized based on the following scenarios (1) if the participant responds with one-word answers (2) if the participant provided an answer unrelated to the question, and (3) if the researcher wanted to gain more on a participant's vague response. Once the questions concluded, the researcher asked if the participants have any questions or any further information to provide. If not, the researcher thanked the participants for their time and ended the interview. The researcher ended the Zoom recording or note taking. The researcher reminded the participants that the transcript would be ready for review (member checking) within two weeks of the completed interview. The researcher continued to complete scheduled interviews even after saturation is achieved.

**Review of documents.** The participants were asked to provide documents connected to the orientation program. Examples of these documents included program schedules, strategic plan, communications, event flyers, training documents, meeting notes, and assessments. In a study, documents can be considered written records, visual data, artifacts, and even archival data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Documents can be valuable in data collection and provide perspective on the values of participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Although the documents were requested prior to the start of the interview, the researcher accepted documents during and after the interview. The researcher requested meeting minutes from student leader meetings, campus partner meetings, and strategic planning meetings. The researcher requested examples of communications to first-year students as well as other programmatic related communications. The researcher also requested documents utilized to develop the

orientation website. The documents were not a requirement for the interview to be conducted. The documents provided additional data for the researcher to analyze and provide perspective on the different aspect of the orientation program.

**Field notes / reflective journal.** Field notes allow the researcher to understand the meaning of the participant responses (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017). The researcher recorded detail information that occurs during the interviews connected to participant verbal response, non-verbal communication, and additional thoughts. The collected notes were used to supplement the participant's response during the interview and be utilized during the data analysis phase. The combination of field notes and interview protocol allowed the researcher to transcribe the data effectively. The researcher scribed the notes quickly and wrote down key phrases to allow for continuous engagement with the participants.

**Data storage.** The researcher created an electronic database to store all information. The researcher utilized Excel and Word to organize the data collected. The data were saved to a Google Drive as well as an external hard drive, and thumb drive. The interview data and the transcribed data were saved within the database. Each interview was labeled within the drive based on the participant's number, position, and interview date. The reflective journal notes were saved in the same manner. The reflective notes were saved and organized based on topic (Yin, 2009). The hard copy documents were filed in a physical folder. The researcher also scanned all documents and saved them within the database. The documents were labeled with participant's number, position, and date of interview. If the document is from a webpage, the researcher captured screen shot the page and save it within the database.

An audit trail is the decisions taken for arriving at certain judgments during data analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). An audit trail is used to increase transparency and is considered a good methodological practice (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The audit trails provide an inquirer the opportunity to trace all data sources back to the participants. All documents and interview data were labeled based on the participant number, position, and date of interview. The transcriptions and reflective journal notes were labeled in the same manner. The transcriptions and reflective journal notes were saved to the study's database.

### **Data Analysis**

The purpose of the data analysis was to create themes from the study data and create connections between the site location's orientation program and retention efforts. An added purpose is to gather information on the perceptions of the professionals who coordinate orientation in relations to orientation programs. Lastly, this researcher sought to understand the overall framework of the orientation program at the institution. The data analysis provided insight and explanations for each purpose discussed. The focus of data analysis is to report how the researcher managed organized, and analyzed the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The data analysis provided possible themes and connections between all the participants. The documents reviewed either supported or contradicted the thematic findings from the interviews. The researcher reported all themes, supporting notions, and contradictions as the data that is analyzed.

**Data Analysis procedure.** After the conclusion of the interviews, the researcher compiled the data collected from the interviews, documents, and field notes. The researcher utilized NVivo software to categorize long narratives from interviews and

code major themes derived from the interviews. Before a full analysis of the data, the researcher conducted an internal and external validity checks to ensure the accuracy of the data. For the internal validity check, the researcher transcribed the full interview transcripts from the recorded Zoom sessions and the field notes taken by the researcher. Internal validity seeks to establish relationships between certain conditions that may lead to other conditions (Yin, 2009). In the case of this study, it is understanding the conditions within the orientation program that leads to student retention. The transcripts were checked by the researcher twice to ensure accuracy. The external validity defines generalization of the study's findings (Yin, 2009). A member check process was initiated in the case of an external validity check. The transcripts were sent to the participants by email for their review for accuracy. The researcher informed the participants of the opportunity to provide written feedback to the transcripts to ensure the nature of their responses are clear and concise. Thomas (2017) discussed, member checking ensures that participant response is portrayed in the correct manner in the case of confidentiality. In addition, member checking allows the researcher to gather additional and more credible information from the participant which can be included in the findings (Thomas, 2017). The participants were given the opportunity to make corrections to the transcripts for clarity. The researcher provided the participants a week to review and provide feedback via email. After all the transcripts feedback was received, the researcher added the information to the master transcript.

Documentation (orientation schedules, website outlines, etc.) and field notes (nonverbal response and additional researcher notes) were utilized as supplemental information for the participant interviews. Documentation and field notes were added



increase depth the participant response. The researcher informed the participants that they would have the opportunity provide relevant documents to their orientation experiences. The researcher gave all participants of the opportunity to provide documents. Participants were reminded that this a voluntary request and they are representing their personal experience with orientation. Also, the researcher collected relevant documents through public access forums such as the institution websites. The researcher reviewed all information connected to both data points and upload into the NVIVO system for analysis.

The researcher utilized the NVIVO system to analyze the transcripts. Alabri and Hilal (2013) stated that the use of a computer based system (i.e. NVIVO) ensures that the researcher is working thoroughly and methodically when analyzing data NVIVO allowed the researcher to conduct a thematic analysis of the data, which is the process of reviewing of commonalities, relationships and difference within the data (Gibson & Brown, 2009). The researcher utilized the NVIVO software to organize and label any recurring themes that emerged. The researcher uploaded all interview transcripts, field notes, documents, and key website information into the NVIVO software. Then the researched began the process of coding the information (themes) to build connections within the data set. A code is considered a category to describe a distinct feature of the data collected (Gibson & Brown, 2009). The researcher used an emergent coding approaching to analyzing the research. Emergent coding allows the researcher to create codes from the words of the participants or concepts the researcher considers relevant from the research (Elliott, 2018). The researcher utilized a word frequency to query to gather the emergent codes throughout the data. This approach is pertinent to the study

because the research is studying the perceptions of the participants and searching for connections between the different cases (orientation programs). The findings were presented in a chart format (data summary table) that specifies the theme and key data connected to the theme, which were generated through the NVIVO system. Next, the researcher would present the relation, if any, between the emergent themes and the research questions through a synthesis of the data. Synthesizing the data displays how the research questions are answered, how the findings relate to the data collection process, how the findings relate to the literature review, and how the findings relate to the researcher's assumptions before the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The presentation of findings take place in Chapter 4.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) stated that is the responsibility of the researcher to conduct the research in a manner that brings no harm to the participants. The researcher was responsible for ensuring the study is treated with care and sensitivity. The researcher is responsible for protecting the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, so the participants are put into undesirable situation due to the study (Yin, 2009). All forms of data were given reference numbers to protect participant identities. All information were saved to a Google Drive, which were password protected. In addition, the data were saved to a thumb drive that were locked in the desk of the researcher. The researcher adhered to all policies of the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) procedures and consent agreement concerning information collection. A confidentiality document was created to protect the identity and information connected to each participant. The consent and confidentiality document was read and reviewed with each of the participants. The

document explained that the interview is voluntary and recorded. The participants can withdraw from the process at any time, the participant can review the transcribed data for accuracy, data security, and the timeline for when the documentation would be destroyed. All electronic and hard copy data would be stored for three years. After that time has expired, the hard copy data and field notes would be shredded and the electronic data including audio files, digital documents, and recordings would be deleted.

### **Potential Research Bias**

Researchers who utilize a case study method may be prone to bias due to prior knowledge of the issue (Yin, 2009). The researcher must be open to contrary evidence and results to reduce bias. The researcher should clarify their bias to the study (Creswell, 2014). In the case of this study, the researcher does have orientation knowledge due to current employment and professional experience. The researcher does not have experience within the public HBCU environment. In addition, the researcher does not have experience in a multi-tiered office structure similar to the current research sites. During the interview, the researcher focused strictly on the questions and exact responses from the participants. Creswell (2013) stated that an effective researcher articulates their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background (i.e. race, gender, history, culture, and socioeconomic background). The researcher still presented findings and information that may contradict the theme of study. This provides the reader with a realistic and unbiased viewpoint of the research (Creswell, 2014). The researcher utilized member checking to allow the participants to provide feedback concerning key elements of the study (Creswell, 2014). All field notes from the study and participant feedback were recorded within the researcher's reflective journal.

**Trustworthiness**

Credibility describes the connection between the participant's perceptions and the researcher's perception of them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The researcher discussed his previous experience as a possible area of bias. The researcher provided full access of the data to the participants for any feedback of their interview. The researcher's main data collection sources were unstructured interviews but also utilized document reviews as well. This created opportunities of corroboration of the evidence presented. The researcher focused to ensure the dependability of the study. The researcher provided an audit trail that explained how the data is analyzed.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provides contextual information concerning HBCUs with high African American retention rates. The chapter provides key information about these institutions such as a population, retention rates, and historical information. The chapter later provides information on how individual participants are selected based on their personal experiences within orientation programming through purposeful and snowball sampling. Next, the chapter provides information associated with the interview process and protocol. The chapter later provides information on data collection, analysis, and storage of all data. The next chapter provides information on the participant's responses from the study.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the orientation professionals' perceptions of the impact of orientation programming at a public HBCU on the successful transition and retention of first-year students. The selected participants currently serve as a professional that leads the orientation efforts at their perspective collegiate institution. The study was guided by one central research question, what are orientation professionals' perceptions of orientation programming at public HBCUs on the transition and retention of first-year students?

Linneberg and Korsgarrrd (2019) discussed the importance of the researcher to interrogate the data to create a convincing "story" and answer the key research questions. The researcher utilized a multiple case study model which allowed the researcher to analyze specific programs, activities, or events which occurred in single or multiple situations (cases) (Creswell, 2014). The researcher utilized the data collection methods of semi-structured interviews, document review, and field notes/reflective journal to record feedback from potential participants. The recorded data from the interview protocol helped identify the emergent themes, sub-themes, and outliers from the interviews. This chapter discusses the data analysis process and the themes that emerged from the analysis.

### **Research Sample Approach**

The researcher utilized both purposeful and snowball sampling to select the potential participants for the study. The researcher communicated to potential participants through the NODA Directory, various social media platforms (i.e., Group Me, LinkedIn, and Facebook), and emails that were included on institutional websites. Through

purposeful sampling, the researcher was able to identify potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. Potential participants who did meet the inclusion criteria were asked to recommend to the researcher other potential participants who did meet the inclusion criteria (snowball sampling), but not individuals from their institution because the researcher was looking for one potential participant per institution.

The researcher communicated with all potential candidates via email (Appendix A) to gauge participant interest. When the potential candidate responded to the email requesting additional information, the researcher scheduled an introductory phone call to provide further information on the study and to schedule an interview. The average time of the phone call was about 15-20 minutes to schedule the interview and respond to any questions from the potential participant. On each call, the researcher discussed the inclusion criteria, interview timeline, transcription process, and additional key information with the potential participants. If the potential participants met the inclusion criteria, the researcher scheduled an interview through Zoom. The potential participants were requested to give permission for the interview to be recorded, reminded that participation was voluntary, and that they could exit the process at any time. All potential participants agreed with being recorded for the interviews. The researcher followed up the completed call with an email with the interview information, consent form, and interview protocol (Appendix B).

The original prospective number of participants was 18. The final number of participants utilized for the study was 12. After further exploration, six of the potential participants did not fully meet all inclusion criteria. Two potential candidates did not work for HBCUs anymore. Another potential candidate had not completed a full year in

their position. Two of the other potential candidates did not have full oversight over the program and just served on a committee. The last potential candidate did not provide additional supportive documentations after the study. Based on their order in the interview schedule, each participant was provided a pseudonym to protect the identities of the participants. The (P) stands for participant and the corresponding number is connected to their order in the interview schedule. Table 1 provides the demographics of the 12 participants. Additional demographic information is displayed in Appendix C.

Table 1  
*Demographic of Participants*

Participant	Gender	Completed Education	Age Range	Institutional Experience	HBCU Alumni
P1	Male	MD*	20 – 30	3 years	No
P2	Female	DD*	35 – 45	4 years	Yes
P5	Female	MD*	20 – 30	1 year, 6 months	No
P6	Female	DD*	20 – 30	1 year, 3 months	Yes
P7	Male	MD*	30 – 40	5 years	Yes
P8	Female	DD*	30 – 40	10 years	Yes
P9	Male	MD	30 – 40	1 year, 7 months	Yes
P12	Male	DD*	30 – 40	14 years	No
P14	Female	MD	30 – 40	5 years	Yes
P15	Female	MD	30 – 40	4 years	No
P16	Female	DD*	40 – 50	13 years	No
P17	Male	DD	40 – 50	1 year	Yes

Completed Education: Undergraduate Degree (UD); Master's Degree (MD); Master's Degree (MD\* - currently in a master's program); Doctoral Degree (DD\* - currently in a doctoral program); Doctoral Degree (DD)

## Data Collection

The researcher collected data through interviews, field notes, and documents.

Participants displayed great interest in the study especially adding to the research knowledge surrounding HBCUs. After the initial phone call, the researcher utilized email communication to provide information and coordinate interview times with the participants. Once an interview time was decided, the researcher provided the participant a Zoom link via a Microsoft Outlook calendar invite. The researcher emailed the participants the consent form, interview protocol, and letter of exemption (IRB). Due to

the social restrictions, the researcher requested the participant provide an electronic confirmation to the consent form. After receiving that confirmation, the researcher continued with the interview process. The interviews were conducted between May 4, 2020 and May 26, 2020.

**Interview process.** The allotted time for each interview was approximately 60 minutes. The shortest interview was about 40 minutes and the longest interview was about one hour and 30 minutes. At the start of every interview, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the study, the consent form details, and interview parameters. The researcher reminded each participant that their participation was voluntary and that their involvement can be rescinded at any time based on their choice. In addition, the researcher alerted the participants that the interview would be recorded based on their verbal permission. Once that permission was provided, the researcher started the recording, which signified the official beginning of the interview.

The researcher began the interview by asking demographic questions to gain key information about each participant for later analysis. These questions focused on the participant's gender, academic credentials, age range, institutional experience, and HBCU alumni status. After this information was collected, the researcher followed the interview protocol. The researcher asked probing questions when participants provided short responses or discussed unique situations. At the conclusion of asking the interview protocol questions, the researcher asked key questions on topics such as sense of belonging, tradition, effects of pandemic, and desired student learning outcomes. The researcher utilized field notes to write down key points of information, verbal and non-verbal participant expressions, and emotional reactions to certain responses. The



researcher concluded each interview with an opportunity for the participant to expound on any topic that they desired. Then, the researcher discussed the timeline for transcriptions and member checking. The researcher informed the participants that interview transcribing would be about two weeks. Once the researcher sent the transcriptions to the participant, they would have a week to review it and to make any changes. If the researcher did not receive a response within that week, the researcher would assume there are no desired adjustments needed.

**Data saturation.** Data saturation occurs whenever there is no new information to be gleaned during data collection. Saunders (2017) define data saturation as, “Relates to the degree to which new data repeats what was expressed in previous data” (p. 1897). Data saturation was reached with the eighth interview. Since the remaining interviews were already scheduled, the researcher completed those interviews as well. The researcher took notes on key similarities in participant responses and content.

**Document review.** Bowen (2009) described document reviewing as the systematic procedure of reviewing or evaluating documents related to a research study. The researcher requested key documents from the potential participants. Bowen (2009) stated that, “the researcher as analyst should determine the relevance of documents to the research problem and purpose” (p. 33). Each potential participant provided a copy of the orientation schedule which is the most relevant document to the study. The orientation schedule provided another layer of verification to the information presented during the semi-structured interviews. Other documents presented by participants were marketing videos, orientation proposals, welcome week schedule, orientation booklet, orientation training documents, registration document, orientation leader information session flyer,

orientation leader application, communication email, virtual page information, class schedule, and orientation website. The documents were analyzed along with the transcripts to identify key themes. The focus of the document review was to triangulate the findings with the interview transcript to seek corroboration among the data sources and breed credibility of the study (Bowen, 2009).

### **Data Analysis**

The Zoom platform provided an audio and written transcript at the conclusion of each recorded interview. The researcher saved each transcript on an external hard drive, placed a pseudonym on each transcription. Since the interviews were recorded via Zoom, a copy was saved within the Zoom's cloud storage which is password protected. Field notes were typed on Microsoft Word, saved, and logged on the same external hard drive. This hard drive is locked in a safe location that the only the researcher has access to. The computer utilized to download the recorded content is password protected. The researcher submitted all transcripts (written and audio) to the NVIVO software for further analysis. The full transcripts for each participant averaged between 40 to 55 pages of collected content for analysis.

**Internal reviews.** The Zoom platform provided an audio and written transcription for each interview. The researcher reviewed each audio transcription against the written transcription to review any mistakes made by the recording software. The researcher made the necessary edits via a Microsoft Word document to make the proper corrections to any missed interpretations from the audio recording software. Some interview responses varied in accuracy of recording due to the technology of the participant and the specialized colloquial language used by the participant. To ensure internal validity, the

researcher replayed inaudible or interpreted responses multiple times to increase the validity of the transcriptions.

**External reviews.** Member checking was utilized to ensure external validity. The researcher communicated the member checking process to each participant at the conclusion of the interview. This process was initially communicated during the communication phone call introducing them to the study. The researcher sent email communication after the interview to remind participants to review the transcriptions. Each participant received a copy of the transcript in a Microsoft Word document via email and were reminded that they had week to make adjustments to the document. Two participants responded that they received the requests and planned to review the transcripts. Those two participants did not send a follow up response or corrected transcript. The rest of the participants did not respond to the email reminder. The researcher assumed that the lack of response signified that the participants were comfortable with the transcripts.

**Transcript analysis.** After the transcripts were authenticated and finalized, the researcher uploaded the transcripts to Nvivo 12. The researcher utilized the Nvivo 12 software to store all the key transcripts. The researcher utilized a hand coding method to increase familiarity with the data and provide flexibility in the analyzation process. The researcher examined the data by recording relevant codes and themes from the interviews that connected to the phenomenon. Field notes were not uploaded into the Nvivo software to ensure authenticity of data and minimize data duplication. The researcher cross-examined the collected data from the interview transcriptions and the field notes.

**Theme development.** Thematic analysis are the steps of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Based on the in-depth interviews, each participant discussed key notations associated with the development of orientation programming that support retention within the public HBCU space. The data analysis process produced six key themes and two outliers. The goal of the developing the themes is to record the patterns in the data that are important (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Theme development was congruent among majority of the participants connected to the in-depth interviews. The key themes supported the presented lived experiences from the perspective of the participants. From the identified results, outliers emerged, which were not codified as a key theme among all participants.

### **Development of Emergent Themes**

Ryan and Bernard (2003) defined themes as “Themes come both from the data (an inductive approach) and from the investigator’s prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon” (p. 88). The researcher reviewed the data for emergent themes that appeared from the various data points. Taylor – Powell and Renner (2003) described the process of emergent categories (themes) as reading the data and locating the themes as they occur. In this process, the researcher does not have preconceived themes but allows the data to produce the key themes. The role of the researcher is to identify the themes that are the most salient and how they all interconnect (Ryan and Bernard, 2003).

Six themes emerged from the analysis of the data. The themes are: (a) Impacting retention with trained orientation leaders , (b) Impacting retention by connecting students to resources to impact barriers to first –year retention and transition, (c) Impacting retention by understanding the role of orientation within first – year retention, (d)

Impacting retention by connecting parents to the student transition process, (e) Impacting retention by utilizing effective orientation practices from the student affairs field, and (f) Impacting retention by promoting community, history, and tradition to create belonging.

Table 2 provides an overview of the emergent themes.

Table 2:

*Emergent Themes and Categories of Responses by Participants*

Themes	Categories of Responses	Participant
1. Impacting retention with trained orientation leaders	Role of orientation leaders; importance of student engagement	(P1), (P2), (P6), (P7), (P8), (P12), (P14), (P15), (P17)
2. Impacting retention by connecting students to resources to impact barriers to first –year retention and transition	Understanding barriers; connecting students to resources; identifying the student	(P1), (P2), (P5), (P6), (P7), (P8), (P9), (P12), (P14), (P15), (P16), (P17)
3. Impacting retention by understanding the role of orientation within first – year retention	Describing the importance of orientation	(P1), (P2), (P5), (P6), (P7), (P8), (P12), (P14), (P15), (P17)
4. Impacting retention by connecting parents to the student transition process	Parent programs	(P1), (P5), (P6), (P7), (P8), (P13), (P14), (P15), (P17)
5. Impacting retention by utilizing effective orientation practices from the student affairs field	Key components of program; Connecting to Professional Organizations; Developing institutional practices	(P1), (P2), (P6), (P7), (P8), (P9), (P12), (P14), (P15), (P16), (P17)
6. Impacting retention by promoting community, history, and tradition to create belonging	Creating belonging; defining tradition; promoting HBCU legacy; promoting Black experience	(P1), (P2), (P5), (P6), (P7), (P8), (P9), (P12), (P16), (P17)

Emergent themes and explanations from the participants are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3

*Emergent Themes and Explanation*

Emergent Themes	Explanation based on Participant Responses
1. Impacting retention with trained orientation leaders	Participants notated the impact and necessity of utilizing orientation leaders throughout the orientation process
2. Impacting retention by connecting students to resources to impact barriers to first –year retention and transition	Participants recounted the strategies that orientation utilized to navigate barriers to first-year retention and transition
3. Impacting retention by understanding the role of orientation within first – year retention	Participants discussed their perspectives on the role of orientation within the transition process and first-year retention
4. Impacting retention by connecting parents to the student transition process	Participants acknowledged the importance of connecting parents to the orientation program
5. Impacting retention by utilizing effective orientation practices from the student affairs field to impact retention	Participants identified specific orientation, student affairs, and institutional practices that impact the effectiveness of the orientation program
6. Impacting retention by promoting community, history, and tradition to create belonging	Participants described how their programs create a sense of belonging within their new students

**Theme 1: Impacting retention with trained orientation leaders.** Participants discussed the importance of peer engagement during the orientation process. The role of the orientation leader was key in developing high levels of engagement as well as providing mentorship to new students. Participants noted the importance of intentional training of their orientation leaders as well as utilizing them as support staff. Many of the participants discussed the role of the orientation leader as the greatest component of their programs. The key responses from the participants are identified below:

(P1) *“Mostly your Orientation Leaders are like you, they speak like you, a lot of times they're from where you're from so it's just a different comfort level”*

(P2) *“Because of their (Orientation Leaders) role on campus. We felt that it was important that they start engaging with the freshmen early”*

(P6) *“Then we have the Orientation Leaders when we are doing bigger onboarding in our office and I say our offices in student engagement and student affairs. They come in and assist us and connecting with the larger group of students that are on boarded at the very beginning of the year”*

(P7)

*So your summer program you're coming in. You're meeting your peer mentors your peer mentor, some of your peer mentors are designated directly to one of the majors that you're probably going to go into And then supervising those peer mentors is a retention advisor directly to one of the majors that you're going into right so you're meeting your first year advisor and your mentor is the first time you ever step on the campus*

(P7) *“So our student leaders are natural helpers right we get referrals for our student leaders from our retention advisors and coordinators and other partners that we have”*

(P8) *“Our student leaders are signed up to 10 students as first year mentor”*

(P8) *[Asked successful component of program] “Honestly, it's the student leaders like they are really the stars of our show”*

(P9) *“Having the ability to come to campus in some time and really spend more time with current students (orientation leaders)”*

(P12) *[Best component of program] “That will be our students our student leaders. Our orientation leaders really drive our program”*

(P14)

*And the reason why we built that model in 2015 for it to be student ran and student led. It's because students know what incoming students want to hear what they need to hear and what they need to see and what they need to know to be successful at the university*

(P14) *[training of student leaders]*

*Because naturally when the incoming freshmen coming in or the transfer students, they're going to cling to their Orientation Leader because they're the expert in this, in this particular setting, so they're going to ask them everything so that student needs to know everything*

(P15) *“They’re (students in small groups) assigned to a university Ambassador that will lead them through the entire day”*

(P17) *“They will have responsibilities. They will have different groups of students that they will be responsible for to help them navigate to several of the activities”*

**Theme 2: Impacting retention by connecting students to resources to impact barriers to first-year retention and transition.** Participants displayed a concise and strategic understanding of the populations they served. In turn, participants discussed the clear understanding of the barriers to the onboarding and retention of new students. Participants echoed the sentiments of introducing new students to key resources and support systems so they can succeed past those barriers. Participants alluded to orientation serving as a controlled environment where students can strategically engage with campus resources and professionals before the start of the academic year. The key responses from the participants are identified below:



(P1) [Students]

*they come up to a hiccup and they don't know who to reach to, they don't know what office does what, and if they don't feel connected to somebody before they ever get to this campus, other than their admissions counselor, then a lot of them will retreat back to what they know, which is keeping to myself, I'll try to figure it out if I don't oh well .... Which ultimately doesn't lead to a good retention rate*

(P2) *"Making sure that our students have the resources that they need and that we're providing the support that they need, especially if they don't have a strong family support"*

(P5) *"During orientation, where, you know, assisting them and how to access their student accounts or access how to register for classes and things like that"*

(P6)

*For our first year student will be actually connecting to the campus resource and understanding the value of that resource.... So we in orientation we do hold a clubs and organizations fair where majority of those offices are able to come, even if they're not a club (I.e. writing center and math center)*

(P7) *"The summer program (orientation) where we also of course will introduce them to their advisors, they see their peer mentors, they get a sense of the campus before anybody's really there and they can assimilate in pretty nicely"*

(P7) *"Our students really have a strong sense of community before the semester even starts and they know that they have somebody in their corner and kind of a support system"*

(P7) *“During access we run we introduce students that every single office and every single resource that we have on campus”*

(P7)

*I see (university) as a mezzo intervention.... it's taking students that might have gotten a 900 on their SAT score and might have graduated high school with a 1.3 GPA and putting them in a summer bridge program. And essentially, teaching them what they weren't taught in four years (high school) in one summer. So that they can attend college are our graduation rates and our retention rates aren't don't reflect what we really do doesn't really reflect our impact*

(P8) *“You check into your residence hall first, then you come over and check into orientation is it straight Disneyland” [discussing the customer service experience when new students and families check in for orientation]*

(P9) *“Welcome Week and our campus have this university studies model where they attend a freshman seminar for the first and second semester so they kind of get the orientation experience that whole first year”*

(P9)

*So it's really important that at the onset that we're providing students and parents with kind of a clear path of processes because students don't have that. They don't have someone who knows what it looks like to go through college or what steps to take to even just go to orientation. So making sure that we're introducing them to all the resources that are available and how we can support them*

(P12) *“We had to incorporate in the orientation program is our ALEKS math exam because even though they have they done fairly well on ACT and SAT, but the concepts... did they really attain those?”*

(P14)

*Let's talk tuition and fees because, again, we have a lot of first generation students. We have a lot of rural students who may have been encouraged to come to school through their guidance counselor, but may have never ever heard of the university let alone how much it costs [educating students and families on the cost]*

(P15) [One Stop Shop] *“So I do that as a part of retention. Because, you know, we can lose students when you know they're coming in and they got to go to seven different offices to get things done”*

(P15) [Orientation programming] *“Delve that out throughout the year and like dish it out to them throughout the year I think they'll grasp it a little more they'll retained it more. And that way we can retain them”*

(P16)

*For the first week of school. So that's kind of like how it works. But once they come to our orientation course that course talks discuss the history Of the University. We teach the alma mater rules and regulations and we have a weekly enrichment lab (lecture series)*

(P17)

*But this year we revamped orientation and made it connect to our university specific class which is an extension to the orientation process and also we're*

*adding some orientation. More orientation or academic portions and business and financial aid sessions within our Welcome Week*

*(P17) “And so that's why we change the orientation to be overnight, and they would not get a schedule, unless they came to the orientation and actually getting the schedule would be the second half of the second day”*

**Theme 3: Impacting retention by understanding the role of the orientation program within transition and first-year retention.** Participants provided their perspective of how their orientation program supports first-year student retention. Participants defined the components and structure of the orientation programs. Participants shared areas of success and as well as areas of improvement to increase first-year retention. Participants elaborated on their personal role in promoting the retention efforts of the institution. All participants promoted the relevancy of orientation program and its connection to the transition of new students. The key responses from the participants are identified below:

*(P1) “We hone in on is making sure students have knowledge”*

*(P2) “So I think because they continuous interaction from our office throughout the entire first year, it definitely supports retention efforts and out student persistence”*  
*[asked about the role of orientation in retention]*

*(P5) “It's [Freshmen Week – Orientation Program] required for all freshmen to attend. And so we have different programs that we have for them that are intentional and making sure that they were helping them with their transition into the university”*

*(P6) “But in terms of like supporting retention in that first year for students. It is creating those pathways for students to succeed in and outside of the classroom”*

(P6)

*Um, so I would definitely say that there is a need for orientation and transition programs at any institution, whether it be HBCU or PWI, I believe those offices are very important. When we have masses of students coming in and even beyond that. And when I say beyond that, I mean after they finish their first week after they finished our first year*

(P7)

*if you take the fish you keep it in the initial water that it's in inside of the bag and you place that bag inside of the fish tank with the new water and you let the temperature All blend together and then you remove the bag the fish can matriculate into new environment very successfully and be fine with it. So what our orientation program is it's that transformation process [discussing the orientation's impact on retention]*

(P8) *"Because without orientation it'll be, you know, sort of scattered in terms of students being able to get their courses, orientation sort of services like the centralized hub or the glue the nucleus to help students progress"*

(P9) *"We kind of try to tie a bow around the whole experience from the recruitment to the time as students come back to campus"*

(P12) *"Orientation is a process is not an event, so the process goes throughout the whole year" [fighting information overload from presenters]*

(P14) *"Whatever students, wherever they are in this process that the university is where they need to be. So our job in orientation is to sell them that and make them comfortable with what they're going to buy into. So that's our level of retention"*

(P15)

*My office is solely for transitioning, first year experience, I deal with students from zero to 30 credits. So what we do is kind of like a baton from admissions and recruitment as they recruit the students admissions, get them processed and then they pass them off to me to get acclimated to campus through New Student Orientation*

(P17) *“We have to do a better job of encouraging faculty to be more visible doing orientations and to be more hands on with the students doing this time because they are the people that I see every day and they really matter and student retention”*

(P17) *“Personally, I think, keeping a laser like focus on a student performance or on their enrollment, as well as their performance” [personal impact on retention]*

**Theme 4: Impacting retention by connecting parents to the student transition process.** Participants discussed the importance of connecting parents and families to the transition of new students. Based on the populations being served, participants echoed the importance of educating the parents and families on all the aspects of the orientation. Many participants described the transition process as an emotional time for parents and how the orientation eases those fears. Participants described parents as an additional layer of support in the transition of new students and how that support can impact retention. The key responses from the participants are identified below:

(P1) *“It’s calming all those fears down for parents and students”*

(P5)

*We have a family track we want to separate the parents because we know that if they're on their child 24 / 7 during orientation...that's just going to coddle the*

*students. So we don't want that. We want the families to get, you know, the families and the parents to get their information and we want students to get their information*

*(P6) "Especially for our parents because I know some offices [orientation] Have parent and family programs underneath them. And when it comes to orientation. But we must understand the stories of our parents as well as the stories of our students"*

*(P7) "I'm complaining about I have to educate the parent and the student and they're [administration] coming up with something called the Parent Portal (online portal to share key student information based on provided permission from students)"*

*(P8)*

*I guess the joy of seeing a parent come in, scared straight anxious nervous frustrated and by the time the two day if it's a freshman two day orientation experience is over They feel completely comfortable with leaving their most cherished, which is their children, with us*

*(P8) "We brought in counseling services to help facilitate, you know, how do you do deal with being an empty nester. How do you deal with empowering your students to advocate for themselves?"*

*(P9) "So really making sure parents understand that, we you to hold on here, the things that you can do to be engaged, with your student. Making them (parents) feel like, okay, we can do this. This is not as scary as we imagined".*

*(P12) "But our population is very different than this is the first time their child or student has gone off to college. So there's a first generational thing for them. So we have the break things down differently than what a normal school would actually do"*

*(P14) “Added more family programming. So bringing back in the parents to kind infiltrate the system to figure out ways to support their students and encourage them while they are there”*

*(P15) “So our orientation [parent orientation] for them is more focused on how we are going to support the student”*

*(P17) “We have a parent orientation as well. So that part. I'm very proud of because when students come we separate new students are in one here in the pants I was even their own orientation about the some of the same things that the students have gone through”*

**Theme 5: Impacting retention by utilizing effective orientation practices from the student affairs field within orientation.** Participants discussed the use of effective student affairs practices, policies, and theories within the orientation program. Participants elaborated on developed practices at the institutional level to positively impact first-year retention. These institutional practices are based on the learned experiences of the participants from trial and error. Participants provided examples on how researched practices impact the development, implementation, and continuous improvement of their orientation programs. Many participants applauded the support of national organizations and associations as an accurate knowledge base concerning orientation development. The key responses from the participants are identified below:

*(P1) [Early Communication and Releasing Date] “For years, man, since I've been here. We had never released orientation days before April with the first one being May....once I got a chance to run it... I was like okay that's gotta change”*



(P2) *“Heavily rely on information from NODA and then the CAS standards are pretty much what I go to as I’m looking at new types of programming that we want to include”*

(P2) *“So I think because they continuous interaction from our office throughout the entire first year, it definitely supports retention efforts and out student persistence”*

(P6) *“I would definitely say the social engagement piece [orientation] really helps to keep our students at the university”*

(P7) *“Students come to that one stop shop and they can handle all their all their things that they need to get handled the right then in there. So if I need to get my financial aid squared away, but I also need my housing, but I also need to make sure that I can register for classes all that is right there. And that one time”*

(P7) *“Cool best practice if you’re ever looking at something group mentoring”*  
*[discussing Alumni mentoring structure]*

(P8) *“I’m such a fan of NODA because NODA competencies they run the gambit of the spectrum. And so that is really been helpful across the board. Like, it’s such a great reflection of orientation transition and retention and I didn’t realize how valuable it was until I got into my enrollment management role”*

(P8) *“Our, our core values and our university strategic plan. Like literally, that’s my roadmap. If it’s not on brand. If it’s not on goal or plan, then there’s no point in us doing it. Like if I can’t relate it back to our strategic goals and I don’t even do it”*

(P9) *“For like using the best practices and it’s always having Orientation Leaders, if nothing else, that’s a non-negotiable”*

*(P12) [Developing the orientation program] we try to do is based on...What does that student needs to retain during orientation. So we kind of do like a task force group focus group (orientation leaders and current student who just finished the process)*

*(P14) “So there were intentional barriers that will put in there putting their way that would not stop them. But just to challenge in support them in a way to see if they would ask these questions” [I.e. using Blackboard, orientation registration]*

*(P16) “Schedule says...I'm a student, you know, I want my schedule. I want my ID here. Where am I staying, and you know where's the café'” [reduced schedule to focus on student key needs during orientation]*

*(P17) [Belonging]*

*That is, is very, very important. The enrollment management, a VP and I talked about that. We want our students to feel a sense of belonging at our university. Which is why we are putting our student engagement and different students in front of students to really do presentations as well.*

**Theme 6: Impacting retention by promoting community, history, and tradition to create a sense of belonging.** Based on the responses, each participant discussed the importance of helping the students feel a sense of belonging with the university. Brady and Gopalan (2019) stated that a sense of belonging leads to increased student engagement and persistence. This need for belonging is especially necessary for the success of first – generation college students (Gillen-O’Neel, 2019). From the perspective of the professionals, their orientation program created that sense of belonging within students through different means while positively influencing retention. Majority of the participants attributed belonging to the nurturing and culturally inclusive

environment. Many described a “family feel” as an inherent component of their program as well as a cultural norm of their institution. This sense of family was promoted to the parents as well as the new students. Others described belonging through the lens of campus traditions that promoted institutional pride, history, and connection.

*(P1) “We say it’s a family here...I always tell students I’m big brother”*

*(P1)*

*Pride ...You know what I mean, is this something that's local member every HBCU Texas Southern had at Grambling has it Southern everybody has that kind of these are our cheers. These are our chants. This is why we're so proud to be a tiger or a lion, or what like there's always that piece where Even before student learns. This is how I act on campus, you learn these things that orientation.*

*(P2)*

*Really I think reflects that true HBCU spirit in that we want to prepare our students took all into the real world. And so represent well specially coming from what most consider to be a disadvantage, which is the fact that they are minorities*

*(P2) [Asked about what students should get out the orientation]*

*For me, that's what that's what my goal is at the end of the year that students have, you know, gotten used to their surroundings. But more importantly, that they have people that they can connect to and feel comfortable with doing so*

*(P5)*

*We're presenting a welcoming environment for the students. Not just the students but their families too because we want the families buy in as well, or I feel like*

*we're not really going to get the students buy in. If the family if their parents don't feel comfortable*

*(P6) "But if we kind of showed them what the institution was built on that might provide them with some inkling or some type of energy to continue on" [teaching student institutional history during orientation]*

*(P6)*

*Sense of belonging does play a role. At any institution because if I don't feel like I belong it I don't feel like I have a need here, then I won't stay, or I'm just going to stay in my room until I can get to the next thing, or the next semester [Discussing Welcome Week]*

*(P7)*

*We show the students Black history. We show the students what Black excellence is we show the student. What it means to be a (university) man or a (university) woman, which is essentially what it means to be a productive Black man or woman in society*

*(P8)*

*We walk the path, sometimes from our campus to the actual Woolworth counters... And things like that are powerful when you talk about standing on the shoulders of giants and, you know, leaning into your ancestors, like everything is right there for them to experience [discussing impact of campus history on the orientation program]*

*(P9) "Kind of creating this experience where students can feel like they belong to this institution. I can see themselves here"*

(P9) *“From the time you start hearing from us from Student Orientation Leaders, get to campus and you’re meeting with your advisors and everyone you encounter ...this got to be Disney”*

(P9)

*Traditions are those things for me that all students share. So when you start talking about a student from an alumni perspective and they look back on their College experiences like what are those things that every student from the institution can say, Oh, I remember...*

(P12) *“And so that was my goal is to make sure they have a pleasant experience to make them feel they are truly a part of the family and part our home”*

(P16) *“Our program is the best kept secret at the university ... we treat students like they are family and it’s genuine”*

(P17)

*I think is very important because when they feel like they belong. They feel like they have pride in the institution and pride in where the institution go so we're even sharing a strategic plan with our students so they can see where they fit in meeting the goals of the strategic plan*

## **Outliers**

After analyzing the data, the researcher identified two main outliers. An outlier is an observation within the data set that is different than the rest of the data (Salkind, 2010). The outliers identified were: Recognizing the Influence of Campus Administration in the Orientation Process and Impacting the Program through Personal Experiences. The

researcher developed outliers based on themes that did not directly correlate with the research questions but provided unique context to the study.

**Outlier 1: Recognizing the Role of Campus Administration in the Orientation Process.** The participants discussed the impact of higher level administrators in the development, implementation, and effectiveness of the orientation program. Some participants hinted at how at times administrators can hinder the success of the orientation program. Those hindrances can be results of differences in perspectives between the professional and the administration or lack of knowledge of the orientation process. Many participants displayed disappointment in the disconnect between themselves and administration. Others expanded on the notion of the overall institutional culture being a barrier to their success. The following represent participant responses:

*(P1) "I believe whatever is best for the university should be what's best for the student and if it's not what's best for student then how can it what's best for the university"*

*(P7) "Decision makers to understand the importance of what we do"*

*(P9)*

*Don't ask us to do business. And then when you get heat back students as I go to complain. They going to do certain things, but every time they complain, and they can go to your office and y'all. Overturned decision. What's the point of us being here?*

*(P14) "I am in the weeds...I deal with the people and the people at the top deal with the numbers" [disconnect between leadership and the program]*

*(P15) [Barrier to retention and transition]*

*We have a culture at our institution where we do not feel it's okay to hold us accountable and I believe that affects them as a first time freshmen, we pick and choose who we want to hold accountable when we need to have a culture of togetherness at our institution*

*(P15) "They don't know what I do"*

### **Outlier 2: Impacting the Program Through Personal Experiences.**

Participants discussed having a vested interest in their institution as well as the program they oversee. Many participants proudly promoted their status as a HBCU graduate and sympathized with the student experience. Many of the participants discussed how their undergraduate experience motivated them to develop an impactful experience for incoming students. Another aspect is participants utilizing their personal experiences outside of higher education to impact their program.

*(P6) "Understand the story of the student" [discussed previous work experience in K-12 and how that experience guides orientation]*

*(P7) "They had everything set up so to where to where I can really just walk it right into the position utilizing all the skills that I've gotten from my education, in my experience" [discusses impact of social work experience and how it impacts their orientation work]*

*(P7)*

*One of the things that I love about my institution is that I wish I had like our leadership is like. So on the ball that like the things that I'm like, well, I wish I had like they're working on getting us*

(P8) *“So I'm an alum of my institution. And I think the thought of me being able to make it a little bit better for somebody than it was when I was there that that's one of the factors”*

(P8)

*I feel like any practitioner [orientation] needs like some sort of psychology course, something like that, because people are half of our battle and I spend about 80% of my day navigating relationships and Motivating people to help me achieve the overall goal*

(P9) *“I want people to have experience that I had an undergrad and unfortunately the students are not getting that experience and they don't know that they're not getting that is that experience”*

### **Field Notes / Reflective Journal and Documentation Analysis Findings**

Field notes were utilized by the researcher to capture notes and the non – verbal cues of the participants. All field notes were captured in a reflective journal. All field notes were compared and analyzed alongside the interview transcripts. The field notes supported the key themes extracted from the interviews.

All fields within the reflective journal were transcribed to a Microsoft Word document. The researcher captured the emotional responses of the participants as well as key demographic information (i.e. gender, age, education, etc.). In addition, the researcher captured their thoughts and ideas concerning the study, such as responses to additional probing questions and relevant statements. Most information in the reflective journal were short statements since the researcher was capturing the information as the



participant spoke. The researcher reviewed the field notes to record any additional relevant information. No additional themes were recorded from the reflected journal.

Document analysis was utilized by the researcher to strengthen and support the research (Bowen, 2009). In addition, to triangulate with other data sources (interviews) to ensure credibility with the study (Bowen, 2009). Once the themes were developed from the transcripts, the documents were reviewed to verify support of the themes or the creation of new themes. All emergent themes were supported by the documents and no new themes were discovered. Participants provided an array of documents (artifacts) that supported their programmatic efforts and provided meaning to the research topic. All participants provided some form of documentation that were reviewed by the researcher. Examples of the documents were orientation schedules (parent, new student, and transfer), videos, orientation program proposals, marketing materials (i.e. booklets), communication emails, training documents, orientation leader materials, event logistics, and course schedules. All documents were reviewed by the researcher and stored electronically. There were not additional themes recorded from the document review. The data recorded from the document review aligned with the existing themes.

Most of the documents represented information from the previous orientation cycle (2019). There were no documents that reflected the upcoming academic cycle due to instability with the COVID-19 crisis. Some of the schedules did discuss virtual components of the program. Most documents (aside from orientation leader training) were created for external distribution to students and families. One participant shared planning document that displayed anticipated requests to institutional stakeholders. The most frequent and relevant style of document was the orientation schedule.

## Chapter Summary

The researcher collected the findings from twelve participants through in-depth interviews. The participants shared their perspectives related to the phenomenon of first – year retention. The findings resulted in the development of six themes which examined the orientation professionals’ perceptions of impact of orientation programming at a public HBCU on the successful transition and retention of first-year students. The in-depth interviews produced two outliers

The key themes are as follows:

Theme 1: Impacting retention with trained orientation leaders

Theme 2: Impacting retention by connecting students to resources to impact barriers to first –year retention and transition

Theme 3: Impacting retention by understanding the role of orientation within first – year retention

Theme 4: Impacting retention by connecting parents to the student transition process

Theme 5: Impacting retention by utilizing effective orientation practices from the student affairs field

Theme 6: Impacting retention by promoting community, history, and tradition to create belonging

Outlier 1: Recognizing the Role of Campus Administration in Orientation Process

Outlier 2: Impacting the Program Through Personal Experiences

The key themes, outliers, lessons learned are expanded on in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 also provides a detailed interpretation of the findings from the research study, lessons

learned , as well as the limitations of the study. Lastly, the researcher provides recommendations for the practice and for future research studies based on the current study.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The purpose of the study was to understand orientation professionals' perceptions of the impact of orientation programming at a public HBCU on the successful transition and retention of first-year students. The qualitative multiple case study focused on the subjective views and meanings of the orientation program from the professionals who develop them (Starman, 2011). In addition, the study examined the phenomena of first – year retention of Black students from the viewpoint of these professionals. The researcher utilized semi –structured interviews to gather information from twelve participants. This chapter includes a brief review of the study, summary of the findings, implications of the findings, recommendations for practice, and limitations to the study.

This multiple case study was based on one central research question, what are orientation professionals' perceptions of orientation programming at public HBCUs on the transition and retention of first-year students?

This study offers insight into the key components of orientation programming at public HBCUs and how these components create an effective transition for their first-year students. The purpose of a case study design is to identify lessons learned and provide strategies so those lessons can be implemented in the future (Baskarada, 2014). At the conclusion of this chapter, the researcher will provide recommendations for future research studies and lessons learned from the multiple case study.

### **Summary of Findings**

This study yielded lessons learned about the perspectives of orientation leaders regarding the connection of orientation and retention at public HCBU's. For Black students, the average retention rate was 67% nationally, which was lowest among all

ethnic groups (NSC, 2018). In regard to retention, students who attend orientation programs have an increased desire to be retained throughout the first year (Prasad et al., 2017). In the case of Black student retention, the majority of the research focused on retention mainly within the PWI setting. This study looked to examine this topic within the HBCU space. Strayhorn (2019) asserted that to promote success within these environments HBCUs would do well to implement comprehensive new student orientation programs to help a student adjust to campus life, connect with peers and faculty, and educate students on campus history.

In the Chapter 2, the researcher expounded on the theoretical frameworks that support orientation programming and retention. Those theories were the following: Sanford's Challenge & Support Theory, Tinto's Retention Theory, Astin's Involvement Theory, Schlossburg's Transition Theory, Stayhorn's Sense of Belonging, and Cross's Black Identity Theory. The researcher utilized an interview, document reviews, and field notes to gather authentic information about the orientation and retention from the study participants.

The researcher conducted twelve interviews that yielded responses through the interview protocol. During the interviews, the participants provided insight on the lived experiences of the orientation professionals developing an orientation and how they felt the program influenced the retention of new students. The participants discussed crafting their programs specifically to cater to their specialized audiences (minority, first – generation). Many discussed the layers of complexity of developing a program to serve the underserved, with limited resources, and the institutional pressure to succeed. The participants agreed that their programs were essential to first year retention, while

providing different perspectives on how orientation completes that task. The information gathered from this study may develop conversations around “best practices” in retaining Black students starting from the beginning of their on-boarding process. These findings may be applicable to retention efforts in the HBCU and PWI spaces. In addition, this study will provide insight on the importance of belonging within the orientation program and how institutional stakeholders can collaboratively create that atmosphere. In spite of various barriers, participants discussed a feeling of social responsibility beyond their job description to create a positive experience for new students and families.

The research findings promoted the importance of orientation programming to the new student and family experience. In addition, that orientation should be a represented and respected within the retention plans of an institution. An analysis of interview transcripts, field notes, and documents led to the discovery of six themes and two outliers. The themes are as follows: (a) Impacting retention with trained orientation leaders , (b) Connecting students to resources to impact barriers to first –year retention and transition, (c) Defining the role of the orientation program within transition and first-year retention, (d) Connecting parents to the student transition process, (e) Utilizing "best practices” from the student affairs field within orientation to impact retention, and (f) Promoting community, history, and tradition to create a sense of belonging. The outliers are “Dealing with the Influence of Campus Administration” and “Impacting the Program through the Professional’s Experiences”.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Participants dictated their perspectives and experiences with coordinating orientation programs within the public HBCU space. In response to the Interview

Protocol, the participants elaborated on the different ways their programs distinctly impacted retention. This section will provide context to the interpreted themes and significant findings associated with the study.

**Theme 1: Impacting retention with trained orientation leaders.** Quality relationship with peers has a positive impact on retention and persistence (Pascarella, 2016). From this research study, participants described the role of orientations leaders being integral to the success of the program (Bristow, 2014). Faced with limited resources (i.e. personnel and finances), orientation leaders are trained as para-professionals to not only engage students but to support functions of the entire office structure. Orientation leaders served as role model to new students as they transition into college (Bristow, 2014). By representing diverse identities, orientation leaders are able to create deeper connections with the incoming students (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). As a result of intense training cycles, orientation leaders are seen as prominent example of leadership within the institution. Some participants discussed training cycles up to an academic year, others monthly, and some weeks before the first event. Components of the training focus on general leadership development but some of it focused on understanding how their role impacted retention. Participants stressed the need to hire orientation leaders outside the typical student leader archetype. Instead of focusing on the extrovert, heavily involved student leaders, participants described the intentional practice of hiring a diverse array of students (i.e. introvert, reserved, not heavily involved, unique personality). The participants discussed the need to utilize intense training programs that focused on leadership development and customer service to produce highly trained

orientation leaders. The researcher interpreted the utilization of highly trained and skilled orientation leader had a positive impact on program success and first-year retention.

**Theme 2: Impacting retention by connecting students to resources to impact barriers to first-year retention and transition.** Orientation professionals are aware that academic and social integration are important factors in retention (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). From the responses, all participants portrayed a clear understanding of their student profile and the barriers that impede their progress. The barriers ranged from lack of financial support, lack of family support, no knowledge of the college experience, institutional pressures, and motivation. The orientation program was described as an essential opportunity to connect student resources and mitigate barriers to retention. Pascarella (2016) discussed that academic adjustment to college, precollege academic preparation, campus racial climate, and institutional characteristics yield positive persistence among minority students. Many participants discussed orientation creating a centralized location that brought together key offices that assisted with the enrollment process. This best practice was key since institutions involved in the study served first-generation minority student who desire layered support (Wiese and Wheeler, 2019). Participant (7) described the orientation program as an “intervention” to supplement the educational gap between K-12 education and higher education. Participant (17) discussed uses the orientation program as a time to educate students on retention and the institutional strategic plan. Some participants provided programmatic support beyond the summer experience as a means to continually connect students with resources in a comprehensive process (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). Participants discussed the delicate balance of providing an engaging experience during orientation as well as



closing the loop on the key tasks connected to enrollment. The researcher interpreted orientation professionals a “gatekeeper” to the new student and family’s transition. As well as orientation serving as the bridge between acceptance to the first-year experience.

**Theme 3: Impacting retention by understanding the role of orientation within first-year retention.** The respondents in varying capacities discussed the role of orientation as creating a seamless transition into the university. Through orientation, institutions have an obligation to provide an overview of expectations during the beginning of a student’s matriculation (Mack and Holl, 2019). Majority of professionals already knew the retention rates of the institution or at least where they could be accessed. Majority of participants stated that they design the program with retention in mind and ways to increase it. Many discussed sitting on institutional committees focused on retention and transition. That transition is actualized through mentorship, connection to resources, and continuous support by the event (orientation). Front loading critical resources through orientation positively impacts retention rates and graduation rates (Mfume, 2016). Participant (17) stressed the notion of introducing students to the faculty that will engage them in the classroom during orientation. The researcher interpreted this as faculty serving as mentors not just teachers (Mann, Andrews, and Rodenburg, 2010). Many participants described themselves as the “point of contact” as issues arise for the student during their first-year. These role compelled participants to advocate and support students outside of their job description (example - providing food to students with food insecurity). Participant (14) described the role of orientation as “selling” students on the collegiate experience. The researcher interpreted that the orientation professionals accurately understood the programs role in retention. The professional have an emotional

investment in the program and see this as a duty to the community and the student, not just a job assignment.

**Theme 4: Impacting retention by connecting parents to the student transition process.** All participants echoed the need for the parents to be involved in the orientation program and transition of their students. Parents are experiencing issues with transition as well (Harper, et.al, 2018). An institution benefits when parents understand campus resources, services, and expectations (Hower and Wolcott, 2019). Participants displayed a mix of frustration but also joy when engaging the parents. Participants stressed the need to “guide” the parent’s involvement to ensure they do not impede the transition of the students. Parents may impede the orientation process due to fear or due negative preconceived notions of the process. Specialized programs for parents can help an institution foster a relationship with parents and families (Harper, et.al, 2018). Majority of participants develop separate programs during orientation for the parent and their student. Participants narrated the emotional progression (high anxiety to calm) of parents during the orientation progress. Participants (1) and (8) describe a joyous feeling when they can “calm the fears” of parents and assuring them that their student will be well supported. Participant (7) discussed utilizing technology to educate parents during and beyond the event. The researcher interpreted that involving parents in the transition is imperative from the perspective of the professionals. In addition, there must be an understanding of the social and emotional transition of the parent / family member.

**Theme 5: Impacting retention by utilizing effective orientation practices from the student affairs field .** Orientation, transition, and retention practices involve a combination of relevant research and theoretical models (Wiese and Wheeler, 2019).

Based on the narratives, participants utilize an array of “best practices” within their orientation program. Mfume (2016) stated infusing best practices in the orientation program yield excellent results. The participants displayed an emotional investment in the students and their practices exuded that. These practices can be observed within two categories, external and internal practices. External practices are developed from research (CAS Standards), benchmarking (other institutions), students affairs associations (NODA, NASPA, ACPA), and student development theories. Internal practices are developed from the perspective of the professional based on the need of the institution. A more accurate definition would be restructuring common institutional practices to make the orientation program more effective and efficient. At the beginning of their positions, many participants described using practices based on their undergraduate experience. As they progressed they developed practices from higher education conferences and through experience on their campus. Participant (1) discussed understanding the importance of communication (releasing event dates in January) during orientation and releasing key information earlier in the process. Prior to this change, orientation information would be communicated in April with first session being in late May. Some participants didn’t distinctly discuss theory, but the elements of theory showed up in the program. Other participants distinctly mentioned Sanford’s Challenge and Support Theory, Maslow Hierarchy of Needs, and Tinto’s Retention Theory. Participant (16) serves in the academic realm and did not notate key student affairs practices. This participant did discuss the importance of mentorship which serves well in the academic and student affairs realms. The researcher interpreted that the professionals are well versed in

practices that support orientation and impact retention. In addition, they are critical thinkers who adapt theories and practices to better serve their institution.

**Theme 6: Impacting retention by promoting community, history, and tradition to create a sense of belonging.** Strayhorn (2019) described belonging as a basic human need and in the college setting a feeling of support from your institution. Through the narratives, the participants described the “HBCU spirit” being celebrated throughout the orientation and influencing belonging. Participants promoted this ideal in different ways. Participants described an innate feeling of family and nurturing promoted throughout the campus. HBCU faculty and staff are integral in student success and retention (Strayhorn, 2019b). Others describe key events (i.e. pinning ceremony, historical landmark visits, and athletic games) as opportunities to celebrate tradition and encourage belonging. Many participants were HBCU alumni and felt a sense of duty to create that sense of belonging they received during their undergraduate experience. Majority discussed a feeling of pride as well when discussing how their program celebrated Black history. They attributed the legacy of Black history on their campuses and transitioning students into a majority Black environment to increases belonging. Strayhorn (2019b) state that Black colleges provide a racially affirming environment that promotes pride and belonging in Black students. The researcher interpreted participants possess a clear understanding of belonging and utilize the orientation program to coordinate it.

**Outlier 1: Recognizing the Influence of Campus Administration.** Orientation professionals are challenged to create a sense of urgency within their institution around orientation (Ward-Roof and Guthrie, 2019). Senior leadership drives the strategic direction of the entire institution (Mfume, 2016). A few participants discussed the direct

impact of campus administration on their program. Many described the influence of campus administration with anxiety and frustration. Many described not receiving full expectations or support from campus administration. One participant discussed a high level administrator only attending their program once in a four year span. This lack of support led to participants to becoming resilient but also cynical of campus leadership. Some participants were very indifferent in their feelings towards campus leadership. Two participants described the influence of campus administration in a positive light due to them feeling supported. The researcher interpreted the participants' sentiments as a cause of concern that should be addressed by campus administration. An orientation office that is well-established and visible allows for a more effective program for students and families (Mann, Andrews, and Rodenburg, 2010).

**Outlier 2: Impact the Program through Personal Experiences.** Some participants described their personal experiences and how that informed the development of orientation. Some of the participants who were alumni of the institution, described this notion with a sense of pride and confidence. They felt they knew the institution and the student experience. Other utilized their past experiences out necessity due to lack of institutional training. New professional should report to a supervisor who can provide direct support, resources, and institutional knowledge (Mann, Andrews, and Rodenburg, 2010). Other described utilizing experience outside of higher education to curate their orientation program. CAS standards dictate that professional should possess graduate level education or transferable employment experiences (Mann, Andrews, and Rodenburg, 2010). Participant (7) described how their social work experience provided greater insight in the developmental needs of their students. Participants (6) and (17)

discussed how the use of their K-12 experience helped those better transition students. Participants (12) discuss how their experience in music industry impacts their work. The researcher interpreted that participants relied on past experience as a need to build confidence in creating the orientation program. These experiences still must be examined and adapted to support the needs of the institutional and can't be relied on solely.

### **Reflective Journal and Documentation Findings**

The research study included reflective journaling, that captures additional interview data, and orientation related documents. The reflective journal was used to capture nonverbal communications, emotional reactions, and other relevant notes. The documents reviewed included documents were orientation schedules (parent, new student, and transfer), videos, orientation program proposals, marketing materials (i.e. orientation booklets), communication emails, training documents, orientation leader materials, event logistics, and course schedules. The most frequently reviewed document among all participants was the orientation schedule. The documentation review was added to the study to triangulate the data from the interviews. In addition to review for additional themes and information connecting the orientation experience to retention from the perspective of the professionals. No additional findings were gathered from the documentation or the reflective journals.

The interpretations from the reflective journals aligned with the major themes of the study. The reflective journals supported the statements gathered from the participant interviews. There were not additional interpreted developed from the reflective journals. The documentation aligned with the major themes as well. Many of the events (i.e. pinning ceremony, resource fair, parent sessions, and small groups) stated in the orientation schedule served as examples of the major themes. For example, of Theme 1,

the schedules described events that were led by the orientation leaders or defined the overall function of the orientation leaders. For example, of Theme 2, the schedules provided allotted time for students to engage with key offices that provided assistance with the onboarding and registration process. This is also an example of Theme 5, because centralizing campus resources to answer the concerns of students is an effective orientation practice. For example, of Theme 3, the orientation schedules provided intentional languages describing the purpose of the orientation events and overall program. For example, of Theme 4, all schedules promoted specific parent events and provided descriptions on intentions of the program. For example, of Theme 6, the ceremonials programs provided language that discussed institutional history and served as a “rite of passage” type of event supported by graduates of the institutions. The pinning ceremony was on type of ceremonial event that promoted campus history, tradition, and community. Many of these events were notated by the participants in their interviews. The orientation schedules provided clear descriptions and expectations of the events. The orientation booklets also provided robust information about the orientation experience during and beyond the event. The orientation leader training schedule provided a unique perspective as well. In the case of retention, there were inferences made toward the subject but was not clearly articulated to new students and families. Most of those inferences were displayed in the information around class registration and the campus resource information. The notion for creating an effective transition for new students was continuously reiterated. In future, these documents may serve as good opportunity to enlighten new students and families on the topic of retention. All other themes were more clearly displayed throughout the documentation.

## **Implication of Findings**

This qualitative multiple case study focused on orientation professionals' perceptions of their orientation programs and retention from the perspective of orientation professionals in the public HBCU space. The study explored the various ways orientation programs mitigated barriers to first-year student retention. The problem statement recognized the issue of African – American student retention and how the HBCU professional represent an untapped knowledge base on the subject. HBCUs enroll a large percentage of African American students than PWI and over perform in regard to graduating those students (Mfume, 2019). As a result of the research, the implications are as follows:

- Need to create increased internal and external awareness of HBCU orientation programs impact on retention.
- Need to provide adequate resources to support orientation programs and initiatives.
- Need to create a sense of belonging from the pre-enrollment experience to the completion of the first-year.

**Need to increase internal and external awareness of HBCU orientation program impact on retention.** The research study produced findings that aligned with presumed outcomes. All participants notated the importance of their program within the retention efforts of their institution. Some differed in the range of impact and the impact they played as a professional coordinating the program. Participants discussed feeling that their program mattered to retention but at times that feeling not being fully validated by their institution. In some cases, respondents discussed lack of validation from some



campus partners others discussed lack of validation from campus administration. Other participants discussed not feeling that validation within the professional organizations as well. Majority of respondents touted the need for involvement in professional orientation related organizations but also signified the lack of representation in regard to other HBCUs. All agreed that the connection between orientation and retention in the HBCU space needed to be explored.

**Need to provide adequate resources to support orientation programs and initiatives.** All participants were unanimous in the idea that they lacked adequate resources. Resources from the perspective of the professional ranged from additional staff, program funding, and support from campus partners. Respondents described that operating with limited resources while still producing a successful program a normal notion in the HBCU space. Most participants discussed the need to be creative and resilient in spite of minimal resources. Some differed in regard to the willingness of campus administration to acquire those resources for the orientation program. Some respondents discussed having to reduce essential retention focused programs due to reduced resources. Many discussed a desire to expand the reach of their program but felt constrained by the lack of resources.

**Need to create a sense of belonging from the pre-enrollment experience to the completion of the first-year.** The research findings declared the need to create a sense of belonging for student throughout the first-year experience. Participants discussed the need to provide additional support to their student throughout the on-boarding process due students being first generational and minorities. Many discussed utilizing orientation leaders, campus traditions, and engaging programming to generate belonging.

Participants also discussed a lack of control over the student experience before and after the orientation program. Participants discussed the need of the institution to display a concentrated effort to integrate students into the campus culture from the day they are admitted. The orientation program should be integrated into all aspects of the on-boarding process to manage a student's sense of belonging throughout the whole year.

### **Findings Related to Theoretical Framework**

Chapter 2 provided essential literature on some of theoretical framework which support orientation programming. The theories that supported this research study include Sanford's Challenge & Support Theory, Tinto's Retention Theory, Astin's Involvement Theory, Schlossburg's Transition Theory, Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging, and Cross's Black Identity Theory. The framework provides insight on how the orientation program is orchestrated with a focus on retention.

**Sanford's Challenge & Support Theory.** Sanford's (Schuh et al., 2011) challenge and support theory is a foundational student development theory within student affairs as well as orientation programming. An institution either employs individuals and policies that support the student or impede the progress and development of the student (Schuh et al., 2011). Participants discussed guiding students past natural on-boarding barriers (i.e. admissions applications, financial aid documents, course registration) while challenging students to act independently (not overly depending on parents) to surpass these barriers. As a result of the research study, participants recognize the orientation program as a mechanism to challenge and support the development of new students.

**Tinto's Retention Theory.** Tinto's retention theory draws attention to the importance of academic and social integration of students, building faculty and student

connections, which influences the persistence of students (Hundrieser & Voigt, 2008). From the perspective of the participants, the orientation program serves the bridge to integrate new students into the campus environment. The orientation program is the first opportunity to build connection with faculty and staff. Tinto (in later research) argued the family, tribe, and church are essential to the persistence of some student (Tinto, 2006). Participants tout the importance of including the parent and family within the student transition. Participants describe the unspoken expectation of faculty and staff acting as that quasi-family as the student matriculates. As a result of the research study, participants recognize the orientation program as essential to the building student connection with institutional constituents to positively impact retention.

**Astin's Involvement Theory.** Astin ascertained that students learn and are more success if they are involved in all areas of college life. Student involvement can be defined as the physical and psychological energy allocated to a student's academic experience in college (Astin, 1999). Participants discussed this theory from two perspectives, from the orientation leader and the new student perspective. Orientation leaders were usually students who truly enjoyed their orientation experience and later want to become involved in the program. The involvement in orientation led orientation leaders to other student leadership opportunities. Many participants boasted that their orientation leaders had a higher GPA than other leadership groups. Students who feel connected to their institution appear to have a positive outlook on their collegiate experience and, in turn, matriculate to graduation (Garland, 2010). Participants discussed developing program schedules that allowed new students to become involved in social

and academic settings. As a result of the research study, participants recognize the orientation program as catalyst for student involvement which impacts retention.

**Schlossburg's Transition Theory.** Schlossberg's Transition Theory is an adult development theory that focused on the transitions that individuals encounter throughout life and the process by which they cope and adapt (Schlossberg et al., 1995; Taylor, 2009). Participants' responses narrated that the orientation program facilitated the transition of new student and parents. Participants understood the emotional toll of the transition on parents especially and provided programs to ease their tension. Transitions are events or non-events that can alter a person's relationships, assumptions, routines, and roles (Taylor, 2009). Participants discussed the importance of continuous support of new students throughout their experience to help them navigate "events" and "non-events". Participants took into account the social, emotional, and procedural "events" that could impact the transition of the student. As a result of the research study, participants recognize the importance of the orientation program to create a smooth transition into the first-year.

**Strayhorn's Sense of Belonging.** Belonging is defined as, "the degree to which an individual feel respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a define group" (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 87). Participants provided examples of key events within the orientation experience that promoted belonging. Some of events celebrate the historical relevance of Black culture and others celebrated the achievement of making it to college. In the psychological sense, a student's sense of belonging can appear as how a person feels valued within their community." (Hausmann et al., 2007 p. 804). Participants discussed one of the roles of the orientation leaders is to help new students feel like they belong at

the institution. Strayhorn (2019) stated that creating a sense of belonging is key to a student's success. Participants noted that students were less likely to be retained if they did not feel like they belonged. As a result of the research study, participants recognize the importance of belonging and intentionally promote it through the orientation program.

**Cross's Black Identity Theory.** Cross' Identity Theory describes the progression of Black identity in which the self-concept of Blackness develops through five stages. The five stages are pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment (Anglin & Wade, 2007). Participants noted that the orientation program supports this theory by promoting Black history and excellence through the orientation program. The orientation program is initial component of transition into a majority Black environment. The orientation program introduces new students to historical landmarks and leaders, prominent Black alumni, and elements of Black culture. The orientation programs serve as the first step in this immersion-emersion experience. As a result of the research study, participants intentionally educate and engage new students in elements of their Black identity.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are characteristic of methodology that impact the interpretation of the research findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Limitations are valid points that may impact the study and lead to future study topics (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). However, all studies have limitations.

- The study focused on professional staff. The study provides in-depth data on the development of orientation programming. The study does not provide data on the lived student experience.

- The study focuses on public HBCUs and not private HBCUs. There are several private HBCUs with above average retention rates compared to their public counterparts. A data analysis of private HBCUs could provide greater strength to the themes developed from the research. The researcher chose to focus on public HBCUs due to the fact that more of their program information and retention data are public records.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Recommendations for the practice related to the findings of this study are as follows:

**Train all campus constituents on the orientation process.** Campus wide collaborations help campus constituents invest in orientation while understanding the needs of students transitioning into the institution (Winter and Howard, 2019). To foster that collaboration, all campus constituents need to train in all aspect of the new student experience. A collaborative institutional commitment to supporting the first-year student is necessary for their overall success (Gardner, Upcraft, and Barefoot, 2005). The comprehensive training should include topics of retention, orientation practices, student profile, campus resources, parent engagement, and resources. A strong institutional commitment should yield effective programs, policies, and procedures to positively impact first- year students (Gardner, Upcraft, and Barefoot, 2005). From these trainings, conversations can be developed to discuss the need for an integrated approach to onboarding new students with key offices such as admissions, advising, first-year experience, student life, and orientation. In addition, the training will open to cost sharing based on shared vision among key onboarding offices so the orientation program can

have adequate resources. Many of the respondents discussed the lack of connection of these offices and how it negatively impacted the program. The results of these trainings should exemplify impact of orientation through assessment data and research that promotes the theoretical impact of orientation programming. Orientation programs do not solely belong to the orientation professional but are a key institutional program that answers the needs of the institution (Winter and Howard, 2019). Through these training, it will empower campus constituents to advocate for the orientation program internally and externally.

**Provide training to new orientation professionals.** Institutional leadership and direct supervisors have the responsibility to effectively onboard orientation professionals (Mack, 2014). An orientation professionals should be experience in student development theory as well as the needs of first year students (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). The respondents discussed instability in their roles stemming from ineffective onboarding, continuous change, and lack of knowledge of the program at the offset of their position. Some respondents discussed their office constantly moving between divisions (i.e. moving from Student Affairs to Enrollment Management). Other discussed their supervisor or administrative leadership constantly changing within a short time period. Others who supervisor staff, discussed professional transitioning in and out of the orientation director/coordinator position. Others discussed working in other functional areas and just merely being “handed” orientation without historical context. With this continued instability, it would be difficult for any program to be successful when it is constantly influx. Based on these notions, the institution should develop transitional documents to track the essential information concerning the orientation program. To

inform current practices it is important to understand the historical context of a program (CAS, 2014; NODA, 2014). In addition, it's important to provide training to the orientation professional through higher education associations and on internal processes. Many respondents discussed "building from the ground up" when initially taking over the orientation program. Many of the institutions with effective programs and higher retention rates boasted professionals with long tenures in their positions. A lack of strategic and informed changes to a program can cause the program to be ineffective and negatively impact new students and families. Institution should develop orientation manuals that provide historical data concerning the program so the professional can make informed decisions. Effective orientation programs must include immediate and longitudinal evidence of programmatic impact on student success (CAS, 2014; NODA 2014).

**Utilize orientation leaders as para-professionals.** Kaiwi and Martin (2019) discussed that personnel are the most important resource to the orientation program. Two key notions that each respondent discussed, the need for additional staffing in their offices and the "best practice" of utilizing orientation leaders. Orientation leaders are the most important component of the orientation program since they are campus ambassadors and possess knowledge of key campus functions (Mullendore and Banahan, 2005). Many orientation programs utilize orientation leaders, but the degree of their usage may differ. A recommendation would be to expand the training of the orientation leaders to operate as para-professionals within the orientation program. In the current climate, hiring additional full time staff is not likely. A different approach would be allowing orientation leaders to help support some office functions on top of engaging the new students. This



could operate as an on campus internship opportunity. This increased responsibility could serve as an interesting opportunity to provide employable skills as well as introduce students to the field of higher education. Kaiwi and Martin (2019) further state that full time staff and student leaders capacities are different, but good personnel practices (i.e. training and development) are effective with both populations. Orientation leaders can connect with students in ways faculty and staff cannot.

**Expand the orientation program beyond a “one time” event.** HBCUs are more likely to enroll underserved, first generation, and low income students (Mfume, 2019). This aligns accordingly to the most HBCUs historical mission of equal access to education. With this in mind, these students will need additional support throughout the first year of matriculation beyond just summer orientation. Pre-enrollment, weeks of welcome, and first-year seminars are all considered part of the orientation process (Mack, 2014). A recommendation is to engage students throughout the whole first year. Mullendore and Banahan (2005) suggest that orientation is a comprehensive process and that this process is imperative to first year retention. This will allow the orientation program to continue to create programs that encourage belonging throughout first year. It takes about a year for a student to truly orient themselves to the campus. Whether through continued peer to peer engagement or freshmen specific programs, the orientation program should continue to support the new students and families for the entire academic year.

**Increase parent and family specific orientation events.** Mullendore and Banahan (2005) describes parents as support system and effective institutional advocate within the orientation program. It is important to continue that advocacy beyond the

orientation event and throughout the first-year. Implementing programs, specialized communications, and events to continue the parent engagement increases the satisfaction of the parent and decrease negative perceptions of the institution (Hower & Wolcott, 2019). This continued engagement can be done through social media, specific websites, newsletters, technological platforms (i.e. Campus ESP), events (i.e. Family Weekend) and family organizations (i.e. Parent Associations) (Hower and Wolcott, 2019). This level of engagement is especially important for families of first-generation and/or minority students who are new to the college experience. The more parents and families are involved they are less likely to impede institutional processes.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for future research studies related to the findings of this study are as follows:

1. Duplicate this study from the perspective of the first-year students who attended orientation
2. Duplicate this study from the perspective of campus administrators at these institutions
3. Develop a study that focuses on the connection of belonging to first-year retention
4. Develop a study that observes the impact of a yearlong orientation program on first year retention / persistence
5. Recreate this study at PWI with a large Black student population
6. Create a study that focuses on private HBCU orientation professionals and their perceptions

7. Develop a study that focuses on gathering the “best practices” for orientation within the HBCU environment
8. Duplicate this study with other racial groups and other institutional types
9. Duplicate this study with both public and private HBCUs but by geographical region

### **Lessons Learned**

This section provides insight on the lessons learned from this qualitative multiple case study.

**Lesson 1:** Orientation programs must be sufficiently funded. Funding can be accumulated through orientation fees, university funds, or external sponsorships.

Sufficient funding allows the orientation professional to create, design, and implement a program that speaks to the unique needs of the student as well as the institution.

Participants discussed having to remove essential elements of the program that positively impacted retention due to a lack of funding. Example of these essential elements were life coaching services, additional student orientation leader positions, marketing materials, technology, etc.

**Lesson 2:** Student orientation leaders are a necessity to the orientation program. They are key to building engagement and connection with new students which can help address retention. Student orientation leaders are capable of expanded roles within the program. If provided training on such topics as retention, leadership, campus resources, mentoring, effective communication, etc., the student orientation leaders can serve as paraprofessionals when a program cannot afford full time personnel. All participants stressed the importance of the role that student orientation leaders played in their

program. One specific participant discussed the benefits of empowering their student orientation leaders to serve as office personnel to support the overall functions of the orientation office.

**Lesson 3:** Campus partners (essential offices that support the orientation program) must be trained on the critical components of the orientation program and how their office impacts the program. When campus partners are trained effectively, they provide an extra layer of support for the orientation programs. When campus partners are not trained on the process, they can unintentionally impede the progress of orientation. A few examples of this could be providing wrong orientation dates, not providing class schedules on the day of orientation, or closing office operations during an orientation session. Training ensures that all partners are communicating accurate information that alleviates the communication burdens of the orientation professional. In addition, understanding how their role in the orientation program impacts retention and supports their office functions.

**Lesson 4:** Orientation programs should be longer than the summer experience. Participants discussed the need to orient students throughout the academic year. It is not likely that a new student and a family will effectively retain all the information presented to them in one orientation session. A partnership between the Orientation Program and First Year Experience programs allows the institution to provide just in time information to new students throughout the first year. If there is not a First Year Experience on campus, the Orientation Program should provide an extended programming that connects to new students and parents to resources throughout the year. An example of this would be conducting a freshmen training on advisement as students prepare to register for the

second semester. Since the Orientation Program establishes that first on campus connection, the personnel of the Orientation Program should be trusted to continue that connection throughout the year.

**Lesson 5:** Student's main concerns when attending the orientation session is their class schedule, housing placement, and experiencing campus life. All three elements should be made available during the orientation program. Example of experiences with campus life can range from meeting student organizations, connecting with student orientation leaders, connecting with faculty and staff mentors, or staying overnight in the residence hall. Participants discussed the positive impact when these elements were available and the negative impact when they were not available. HBCUs service a large percentage of first generation students and families who utilize the orientation program (within an in person experience) to solidify onboarding processes. This encompasses the housing placement, financial aid, and class registration. If these processes are not within the orientation schedule, families will disconnect from events to complete these processes themselves.

**Lesson 6:** The Orientation Program should make connection with students and parents once the student has been admitted. Orientation Programs should partner with the Office of Admissions to build connection early and support the students through the onboarding process. An example of this could be utilizing Student Orientation Leaders to call students after admittance to answer key questions and provide mentorship through the onboarding process. Admissions Counselors make the first external connection with students in high school. The issue is once the academic year starts, Admissions Counselors are back on the road (during a normal cycle) recruiting the next class of

students. The Orientation Program could serve as that gatekeeper of information and support from acceptance until the end of the first academic year. Involving the Admissions Staff in the Orientation Programs creates a seamless transition for students as they enter the campus community. Examples of involvement of the admission office maybe involving them during the orientation check in process. Another idea is shared webinars between Orientation and Admissions explaining next steps in the onboarding process. Lastly, Admissions and orientation staff working together to plan programs for orientation. Especially since the admission staff knows first-hand the needs of the new incoming class.

**Lesson 7:** Students and families are attracted to the unique culture and nurturing atmosphere of HBCUs. In the current social climate, students are attending HBCUs to connect with the historical legacy of the institution and learn more about Black culture. Orientation programs should promote institutional history, tradition, and Black culture throughout the orientation program. For example, participants discussed taking students on tours of historical campus landmarks or engaging student in Black historical sites within the local community. The promotions of these elements satisfies a need of students but also promotes a sense of belonging with the campus.

**Lesson 8:** Involving alumni in the Orientation Program creates a positive impact on students and families. Examples of these involvement events can be alumni speakers at events, alumni mentors, alumni businesses supporting orientation, providing alumni scholarships to new students, or at least involving alumni in the development of the program. The presence of alumni provide students a viewpoint of what graduating from

this specific institution can provide them. Involving alumni provides another opportunity for students to gain an authentic perspective of the institutional experience.

**Lesson 9:** HBCU Orientation Professionals are truly passionate about providing students a great experience. They just need ongoing administration to support them. Many of them are experiencing burnout because of a lack of resources and support while balancing multiple positions. In regard to resources, many professionals need additional personnel to create effective programs. Administrator must be intentional on listening to the needs of the orientation personnel and be creative in providing the necessary resource they need. Participants even discussed the need of administrators to so support of their program by showing up to events. This provides the professional a tangible confirmation that the institution cares about the student and the professional overall.

**Lesson 10:** Institutions must keep accurate data concerning their orientation. This allows institutions to have an effective transfer of knowledge when programs change personnel. Examples of these data would be program expectations, program outlines, marketing documents, program manuals, etc. Many of the institutions from the study with successful programs had long standing professionals coordinating the program. This is not always the case since many see orientation as a transitional position. It would be a smart practice of institutions to develop transitional documents for the professionals they hire so effective institutional practices are not always lost when a professional leaves. The idea of building from the ground up is a normal notion concerning orientation but constant change in leadership is not effective in developing consistency within a program.

**Lesson 11:** Orientation professionals understand the impact of retention that the program has but the campus community may not. The orientation professionals must provide training to the campus community about the nuances of the orientation program. In addition, provide information on trends and strategies within the realm of orientation. All participants discussed interacting with an orientation related association. Utilizing information from these associations can help the campus community understand the retention ramifications of an effective orientation program. An example of this could be a quarterly training on the trends, issues, and opportunities affecting the field of orientation, transition, and retention.

**Lesson 12:** Parents can provided increased support of the orientation program if properly integrated. All participants discussed the need for parent specific programs during the orientation. The transition into the institution is a new process for the parent and the student. Resources should be provided to parents to help them cope with the transition. An example of this could be a session from the counseling office helping parents understand how to support their student's transition into adulthood. When parents are not properly integrated they can impede the onboarding process. Examples of this could be parents pulling their students out of sessions to handle tasks that they deem important. Another example could be parents not providing essential documents (tax forms for financial aid) which impede the student transition because the parent does not fully understand the overall process. Parents should also be connected to the orientation program through the first year as well so that parents can understand how to support the matriculation of their student.



**Lesson 13:** The orientation program must speak to the current needs of the students it serves. HBCUs serve unique student populations but the needs of those populations may change year to year. The participants from the study discussed the importance of understanding the social, academic, generational, and financial characteristics of their incoming student populations. Understanding these data will allow professionals to constantly assess their programs and make intentional changes on a yearly basis. This allows the orientation program to remain fresh and innovative. Some characteristics are continuous such as the academic needs but the social needs may be ever-changing depending on environmental pressures. For the example of social pressures, in regard to the recent pandemic, mental health programming will be essential for incoming students to experience. In regard to academics, institutions will continue to utilize placement testing with the orientation program to have an accurate view of the new students' academic preparedness. As a result, place them in courses that will help them succeed within the first year.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the researcher provided a concise summary of the research findings, interpretations, implications, and lessons learned. The researcher also included perceptions of the findings within the theoretical framework and suggestions for future research. The study provided insight on first-year retention and its connection with orientation programs. The research provides clear insight from orientation professionals who develop these programs while serving majority Black populations. The research findings affirm the perception of these professionals making the case of how their particular programs attributed to retention. To conclude, the research study promotes the

importance of orientation programming within the retention efforts of the institution. This study should provide strategies to enhance the orientation program through greater administrative awareness, increased resources, intentional student leader development, and innovative program practices. These enhancements should provide defined practices to increase Black student retention in various institutional environments.

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## Appendix A

### Email and Phone Call for Recruitment

### **Email and Phone Call for Recruitment**

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Ronnie Mack and I am a Higher Education Leadership Doctoral Student from the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice at Nova Southeastern University. I am currently developing a dissertation proposal that examines new student orientation programs at high ranked public historically Black college & universities (HBCUs). The study will utilize a qualitative methodology to gain insight from program directors on the development of their orientation programs and the connection of their programs to institutional retention efforts.

The purpose of this communication is to connect directly with program coordinators and directors who operate in this functional area. Each individual participant must meet the following inclusion criteria to be included in the study:

- The participant must work directly with orientation programs and have an understanding of the institution's retention initiatives
- The orientation program that the participant supervises must be at a public HBCU, special consideration will be given to the institution listed in the above section
- The participant must have one to two years of experience in their role supporting orientation
- The participant must have oversight of the orientation programs

- The participant must display availability and willingness to participate as well as be able to communicate their experiences within the phenomenon effectively.

Based on you meeting the inclusion criteria and agreed involvement in the study, you will participate in a 1 hour recorded interview. In the interview you will be asked questions about your experiences as an orientation professional. In addition, I will provide you a transcript of your recorded interview and that request your assessment of the transcript for accuracy.

If you choose to be a part of this study, please be aware you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. As a potential participant of the study, you will be representing your personal experiences and not operating in an official capacity of your institution. However, if you choose to begin the study, please be aware that your name will not be made known to any outside party. The research study will not reveal any personal information of any participants. In this research, there are no foreseeable risks to you.

If possible, I would like to set up a phone conversation to discuss my proposal with you and assess your interest in serving as a possible study participant. If you are interested in supporting my study, feel free to contact me by email (rm1823@mynsu.edu) or by phone (386-333-2023). Thank you in advance for your support.

Sincerely,

Ronnie Mack



*\*Note: This email will be sent to potential participants. This message will also operate a script for phone call contact.*

## Appendix B

### Qualitative Interview Protocol

## **Qualitative Interview Protocol**

### **Demographic Questions**

1. What is your age range (if you are willing to share)?
2. What is your gender & ethnicity?
3. What are your professional / academic credentials?
4. Are you a graduate of a HBCU?
5. Where is your office located? (Student Affairs, Enrollment Management, Academic Affairs, etc.)

### **Opening Discussion**

1. Tell me about yourself (institution, position, trajectory into the field, personal background, etc.)

### **Interview Questions**

1. From your perspective, how does your program support the retention efforts of your institution?
2. What are some barriers to your students transitioning through the first year?
3. What standards, theories, learning outcomes, or best practices that guide the development of your program?
4. How are your student leaders trained and developed to support your program?
5. What type of training or professional development is available to you as a program coordinator / director?
6. What are any barriers to the success of your program?
7. What would you suggest as ways to improve the program and its impact on first-year retention?

8. Who are the key campus and community partners that support your program?
9. From your perspective, what are the major differences of your program which is at a HBCU compared to a PWI?
10. What is the structure of your office in regard to personnel?
11. What programmatic components make a successful orientation program?
12. What is your role (as a professional) in first-year student retention?
13. What training and support do you receive to ensure your success?

**Follow Up Questions**

1. How pandemic has affected your processes?
2. How do you define traditions?
3. How do define “belonging”? How does your program create “belonging”?
4. What motivates you?

## Appendix C

### Participant Demographic Information

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<i><b>Participant</b></i>	<i><b>Ethnicity / Race</b></i>	<i><b>Age Range</b></i>	<i><b>Gender</b></i>	<i><b>Education</b></i>	<i><b>Institutional Experience</b></i>	<i><b>SA, EM, or AA</b></i>	<i><b>HBCU Alum</b></i>
P1	Black / African American	20 - 30	Male	Bachelor: (Economics & Business Management) Masters: In Progress	3 years	Enrollment Management	No
P2	Black / African American	35 - 45	Female	Bachelor: (Psychology & Criminal Justice) Masters: Administration of Human Services Doctoral: Higher Education Leadership	4 years	Academic Affairs	Yes
P5	Hispanic & African American	20 - 30	Female	Undergraduate: Sports Management Masters: Higher Education	1 year, 6 months	Student Affairs	<b>No</b>
P6	Black / African American	20 - 30	Female	Bachelor: Biology / Pre-Medicine & Biology Secondary Education Masters: Higher Education and Student Personnel Doctoral: In Progress	1 year, 3 months	Student Affairs	Yes

P7	Black	30 - 40	Male	Bachelor: Social Work Masters: School Social Work	5 years	Enrollment Management	Yes
P8	African - American	30 - 40	Female	Bachelor: Speech Communication Masters: Leadership & Management Doctoral: Interdisciplinary Studies	10 years	Enrollment Management	Yes
P9	African - American	30 - 40	Male	Bachelor: Computer Science Masters: Public Administration	1 year, 7 months	Student Affairs	Yes
P12	African American	30 - 40	Male	Bachelor Exercise Science and Science Nutrition Master's College Personnel Administration Higher Education Doctoral: Higher Education	14 years	Enrollment Management & Student Affairs	No
P14	African American	30 - 40	Female	Bachelor: Speech Communications Masters: Education	5 years	Student Affairs	Yes

P15	African American	30 - 40	Female	Bachelor: Psychology Masters: Higher Education	4 years	Enrollment Management	No
P16	African American	40 - 50	Female	Bachelor: Fisheries & Wildlife Masters: Aquaculture & Fisheries Doctoral: Urban Fishing	13 years	Academic Affairs	No
P17	Black	40 - 50	Male	Bachelor: Mass Communication Masters: Elementary Education Doctoral: Educational Leadership	1 Year (20 Years of Combined Experience)	Student Affairs & Enrollment	Yes