Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master's Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation: A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach

Ashley L. Isreal
Clemson University, aisreal@g.clemson.edu

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how Black master’s students processed facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. The objective was to determine the processes Black master’s students followed when they decided to attend graduate school. To accomplish this objective, I examined the main factors that led Black students to pursue graduate school and the critical moments that influenced their ultimate decisions to apply. Data from students provided the basis for constructing a theory.

This study included a constructivist grounded theory methodology approach and an emergent, participant-generated method called photo-elicitation. The constructivist grounded theory methodology approach can construct theory from the data. The photo-elicitation method approach can sharpen memory, support self-reflection, and stimulate interview responses to generate the data (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Harper, 2002). Participants for this study took photographs of how they decided to attend graduate school and then discussed the photographs in a photo-elicitation interview. Data analysis involved Charmaz’s (2009) four cycles of coding: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, (c) selective coding, and (d) theoretical coding. The developed conceptual framework provided the analytic underpinning for the four cycles of coding (Charmaz, 2009).

Findings from eight participants in this study revealed five major themes about how the Black master’s students gathered facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. The five theoretical themes that emerged were (a) Mental Stimulations, (b) Experiential Experiences, (c) Community Support, (d) Life Strategies, and (d) Identity Influences.
The findings of this study have implications for practical applications towards administrators and policymakers in higher education that recruit and attract Black students into graduate school. Additionally, there are implications for researchers that utilize photo-elicitation in their research studies and other emergent methods. Findings address repeated calls for Black master's students to offer literature towards understanding how the process works for Black students to enroll in graduate school.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my son Noah and my mother Peggy. Thank you for being my fuel that keeps me going. I love you both with all of my heart.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank God for infusing the passion I have for higher education. Through higher education, I can continue His work by assisting others to become more critically sophisticated and intellectually engaged in today’s world. I believe in the power of higher education to change peoples’ lives by using these strategies. Therefore, thank you for using me. Furthermore, thank you for leading me to Powerhouse Christian Church, where I am spiritually fed under Pastor Lenny Gaines to continue your work.

I would like to thank Dr. Tony W. Cawthon, Alumni Distinguished Professor of Education, for his incessant belief in my abilities. Also, for his accessibility throughout my dissertation process. I am truly grateful for your speedy editing turnarounds. Many thanks as well to my dissertation committee members, Dr. Pamela A. Havice, Dr. Robin J. Phelps-Ward, and Dr. James W. Satterfield. Collectively, you have all provided valuable feedback, clear direction, and implausible guidance as members of my dissertation committee. I am forever grateful for your contributions.

I am grateful to my two favorite mentors that have supported and challenged me along my journey. Thank you to the best advisor of the Graduate Student Government and the Black Graduate Student Association, Mr. Benardo Dargan, for helping to develop me professionally. You are the epitome of an advisor, mentor, and coach. Thank you to Dr. Tia Dumas who equally poured into me. Thank you for always calling me a “champion” and making sure that completing my doctoral degree was a priority.
Lastly, I want to thank my incredible mom, Peggy Isreal, for her continuous support throughout the years. You sacrificed so I could become the best version of myself. I am thankful for the best sister in the world, Faith Isreal, who continuously pushes me beyond my limits. Your vision for my life is always greater than what my imagination can hold for myself. Additionally, I want to thank my incomparable best friend, Brandyn New, for always being there for me throughout my entire doctoral journey. You ensured I had all I needed to complete my degree, and for that reason, I will forever appreciate you.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Determining whether to attend graduate school can be a complex decision for many Black undergraduate students (Perna, 2004). Many factors influence their decisions (Strayhorn et al., 2013). Although higher education recruiters make great efforts to enroll Black master’s students in graduate programs, there has been little inquiry into how Black students gather information about the nature of graduate school. Thus, there is scant knowledge about how Black students’ decide to pursue a master’s degree (Perna, 2004; Rogers & Molina, 2006; Strayhorn, Tillman-Kelly, & Suddeth, 2013; Tate et al., 2015). A better understanding is needed concerning how Black students obtain and use information in making decisions to pursue master’s degrees. This information will enable administrators to be more successful in recruiting Black master’s students.

I decided to undertake this study because of my own experiences as a Black undergraduate and graduate student. I considered my own decision-making process when determining whether to attain a master’s degree, and chose to examine how other Black students decided to pursue in master’s degree programs. If graduate school recruiters were aware of the factors that led Black students to pursue master’s degrees, they could be better prepared to increase Black student enrollment in graduate master’s programs. There has been little empirical research on how Black students gather information to decide to pursue graduate school. This lack of research, coupled with my own
experiences, inspired me to examine the factors that led Black students to pursue master’s degrees.

This chapter has eleven sections, which are listed as follows: (a) background of the study, (b) definition of terms, (c) statement of the problem, (d) purpose of the study, (e) research questions, (f) overview of study design, methodology, and analysis, (g) conceptual framework, (h) delimitation of the study, (i) limitations of the study, (j) significance of the study, and (k) expected findings.

**Background of the Study**

The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) fundamentally changed U.S. society by declaring that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional. This decision led to an increase in the number of Black students enrolled in colleges and universities. In the early 1970s, Black students represented 3.4% of all graduate students enrolled in the United States, in comparison to 2.9% in 1960 (Brown & Stent, 1975). During the early 1970s, 159,771 Black students earned master’s degrees and 2,280 earned doctoral degrees (Brown & Stent, 1975; Bryant, 1970).

The percentage of Black students attending graduate school in the U.S. is only 11.3%, in comparison to 72.8% White students (Council of Graduate School [CGS], 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2013). The NCES (2010) noted that only 5.3% of Black population in the United States earned master’s degrees and that only 0.6% earned doctoral degrees in the United States from 2007–2008. These numbers remained the same in 2015 (CGS, 2015; McCallum, 2015). Black student recruitment methods need to change to increase the number of Black students enrolled in graduate
programs. Although improved recruiting mechanisms could be effective in increasing the number of Black master’s students, it is more important to identify the factors that led these students’ to apply to graduate school, because these factors would provide a better understanding of the students’ decision-making processes, enabling recruiters to plan more effective recruitment strategies. Crawford (2016) argued that “understanding the factors which motivate African-American youth will help enable all systems in their lives to adopt strategies and policies directed at reducing disparities and continuing increases in enrollment” (p.1). The goal of this study was to build on Crawford’s (2016) work, which studied the decision-making process of Black undergraduate students. My study examined the processes that led current Black master’s students to pursue graduate education. In this study, I employed photo-elicitation, a method that is known to enhance self-reflection and to unpack complex realities (Croghan et al., 2008; Lapenta, 2011). I also used constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2008) to guide the study. I used this theory to generate data and guide the analysis, because it is intended to facilitate the creation of a theory to best explain the data.

**Definition of Terms**

The following terms are used throughout the study.

A critical moment is a time of critical and conscious awareness that leads an individual to a “final choice” in the decision-making process. For example, critical moments led Black undergraduate students to apply for graduate degrees. A critical moment is very similar to the tipping point, which is a moment when an “idea, trend, or
social behavior crosses a threshold, tips,” and then sets off in a new direction (Gladwell, 2006, p. 1).

*Data generation* results from using the photo-elicitation interview method with study subjects (Guillemin & Dre, 2010; Rose, 2012). A major advantage of using photo-elicitation in a research study is that the photographs allow the researcher and participants to generate collaboratively data together (Harper, 2002). This term is intentionally used throughout the study, rather than the term “data collection.”

*Epistemology* is “what it means to know” (Scotland, 2012, p. 9). Furthermore, epistemology is “concerned with the nature and forms of knowledge” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 7). Epistemological assumptions are “concerned with how knowledge can be created, acquired and communicated” (Scotland, 2012, p. 9). Epistemology is used in the study to illustrate my knowledge of the world.

*Full-time enrollment* means that a student is enrolled as a graduate student for a minimum of nine credit hours (Council of the Graduate Schools, 2011).

*Graduate school* is a division of a university offering advanced programs in research beyond the bachelor’s degree (Berelson, 1960). Enrollment in graduate school can enable students to earn master’s degrees or doctoral degrees. This study focused on students that were enrolled in master’s degree programs.

A *graduate student* is a student (the unit of analysis for the study) who is enrolled full-time in graduate school (Council of the Graduate Schools, 2011).

A *hashtag* is “a word or phrase preceded by the symbol # that classifies or categorizes the accompanying text (such as a tweet)” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary,
2017). This study used hashtag phrases to describe the participants’ photographs instead of captions.

*A master’s student* is a graduate student who is enrolled in a master’s program and only intends to receive a master’s degree. More generally, the term graduate student describes a student who is enrolled in graduate school. A graduate student is considered to be “a student who is studying for a degree that is higher than the one received after four years of study at a college or university” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2017).

*Photo-map* is used as a term similar to concept maps. A concept map is a “process that involves the identification of concepts in a body of study materials and the organisation of those concepts into a hierarchical arrangement from the most general, most inclusive concept to the least general, most specific concept” (Novak, 1981, p. 3). Furthermore, it is “for reflecting on one’s own perceptions” (Malone & Dekkers, 1984, p. 231). Photo-map was a term coined for this research study because of the use of photographs to describe a process.

*Predisposition* is a “developmental phase in which students determine whether or not to continue their education beyond high school” (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In this phase, students develop a desire to attend college without focusing on which particular institution to attend. This research study focused on this phase as it related to the Black master’s students.

*Process knowledge* is a term used by scholars to describe the understanding of a complex matter in a way that is “constructed from theoretical knowledge … and direct experiences” (Griffiths & Guile, 2003, p. 62). Process is “the flow of
action/interaction/emotions that occurs in response to events, situations or problems” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 87). Process can occur “over time and space, changing or sometimes remaining the same in responses to the situation or context” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 165). This research study examined the flow of activities, interactions, and emotions that led Black students to pursue higher education at the graduate level.

Knowledge is derived from “information” (Cong & Pandya, 2003, p. 26). The terms “information” and “data” are frequently used interchangeably with the term “knowledge” (p. 26). Furthermore, “data are raw facts” (p. 26). Cong & Pandya stated, “for data to be of value, however, they must be processed (put in a given context) to obtain information, which decision can be made. Knowledge is perceived as meaningful information” (p. 26). For the purpose of this study, the term knowledge is identified as facts, information, and awareness. The term knowledge is also used interchangeably with information.

Statement of the Problem

Although there have been many initiatives and programs to increase the number of Black college students in graduate schools, little empirical research has examined how Black master’s students obtain and use knowledge of graduate education (CGS, 1988; Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Taylor, 1989). There are few theoretical models that describe how these students process information about graduate education and what factors inspire them to apply for graduate school (Weisbuch, 2005). Over the years, scholars have identified many theoretical gaps in higher education literature, and have recommended that further research be conducted on how Black students obtain
knowledge about higher education (Banks, 1993; Crawford, 2016; Ethington & Smart, 1986; Strayhorn et al., 2013). Researchers have shown a particular interest in developing an understanding of how Black master’s students decide to enroll in higher education programs (Crawford, 2016; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

There has been some research studies on Black students in higher education, but the literature that exists is fragmented and scant. Few studies have focused on the experiences of Black students in graduate school; those that have focused on this topic include Davidson and Foster-Johnson (2001), Patton (2009), and Perna (2004). Some studies have also reported education research statistics concerning the lack of Black students in higher education (Freeman, 1997; Jackson, 2012; Maton, 2004; Maton & Hrabowski, 2004; NCES, 2013). Some studies have also made practical recommendations on recruitment and attainment strategies for Black graduate students (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; McCallum, 2015). However, there are few studies about the thought processes of Black graduate students, such as how they process knowledge about graduate education (Bakari, 2000; Banks, 1993). The remaining literature on Black students in higher education is anecdotal, and does not focus on Black master’s students (Bakari, 2000; Banks, 1993; Crawford, 2016; Strayhorn et al., 2013).

There are few empirical studies on how Black students decide to attend graduate school. The studies that do exist include those by Collins (2012), Hunter (2005), McCallum (2015), and Smith (2005). These studies provided valuable information on the decision-making processes of Black students who were enrolled in both master’s and doctoral degree programs, but these authors’ research questions only asked why students
chose to attend particular universities, and the unit of analysis was the doctoral student. The study findings also did not include much information on how the participants obtained knowledge about and decided to apply to graduate school. The common strand among the studies by Collins (2012), Hunter (2005), McCallum (2015), and Smith (2005) was that the authors used traditional data collection methods, such as structured interviews. Some researchers who have used visual research methods have argued that traditional interview methods prevent subjects from speaking about abstract concepts, and do not enable the researcher to understand the subjects’ thought processes (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2011). To overcome this objection to traditional methods, this study used the emerging method of photo-elicitation to generate, examine, and unpack the complex nature of knowledge acquisition and processing (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Harper, 1986).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine how Black master’s students processed facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. The objective was to determine the processes Black master’s students followed when they decided to attend graduate school. To accomplish this objective, I examined the main factors that led Black students to pursue graduate school and the critical moments that influenced their ultimate decisions to apply. Data from students provided the basis for constructing a theory.

**Research Questions**

The overarching research question for this study was as follows: *How do Black master’s students process knowledge about deciding to pursue graduate school?*
Secondary research questions included the following:

- What factors led Black master’s students to apply to graduate school?
- What were the critical moments that influenced Black master’s students’ decisions to apply to graduate school?

**Overview of Study Design, Methodology, and Analysis**

I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2005) to select eight Black, full-time master level students to participate in this study. Their disciplines were not taken into account. I generated data concerning why these Black master’s students decided to apply in graduate programs through demographic information, photographs and hashtags, photo-elicitation interviews, a photo-map activity, and verbal summaries recorded on a field instrument. The data was analyzed using constructivist grounded theory, to create a theory that explained the data.

Clark-Ibañez (2007) argued that photo-elicitation was an appropriate emerging method for a research study, in contrast to traditional methods, because the use of photographs promoted “reflections that words alone cannot” in interview settings (p. 171). To generate Black master’s students’ reflections on what led them to apply to graduate school, I integrated photo-elicitation into this study. The subjects were asked to take five photographs over a period of five-days to illustrate how they gathered facts, information, and awareness about graduate school before deciding to apply. The participants captioned the photographs using hashtags and discussed the photographs during the photo-elicitation interviews. Furthermore, participants created photo-maps with the photographs as their activity. The photo-elicitation interviews consisted of the
subjects and interviewer discussing the photographs that were taken (Clark-Ibañez, 2007; Harper, 2002; Rose, 2012). Each photograph served as a self-reflective tool and made it easier for the subjects to engage in deeper, more reflective conversations and explore deeper emotions than they might have been able to if they were only asked direct questions that could have biased their responses (Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2011). The five-day time period allowed the subjects to reflect on their thoughts before engaging in the photo-elicitation process (Posser, 2011; Reese, 2013). Photo-elicitation generated three types of data: (a) photographs and hashtags that the subjects created, (b) information about the thought processes documented by the photographs and hashtags, and (c) a record of the interviews that served to indicate how participants’ subjectivity influenced the study.

Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist grounded theory methodology was used to organize the study results and gain an understanding that was appropriate, integrated, and justified. This methodology included procedures that facilitated an understanding of human experiences. Constructivist grounded theory is “concerned about process” (Charmaz, 2009, p. 136). The intent of this study was to identify processes, so the constructivist grounded theory approach was appropriate, because it enabled the researcher to form a theory grounded in the data that were generated. Constructivist grounded theory allowed the researcher to enter the subjects’ world and to view that world from the subjects’ perspectives.

Charmaz’s (2009) four types of coding were employed to organize the data before analysis. The four types included: (a) initial coding, (b) focused coding, (c) axial coding,
and (d) theoretical coding. The first step, initial coding, was to code the data line-by-line or incident-by-incident (Charmaz, 2011). In this step, I identified the key phrases that showed how the subjects processed facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. These phrases allowed the researcher to understand what inspired the subjects to pursue a master’s degree. I continued through all of the stages of coding until I reached the most sophisticated type of coding, which is theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2011).

Theoretical coding enabled me to construct a concept of family, which will be further explained in a subsequent chapter to explain the data. Photo-elicitation complemented the constructivist grounded theory methodology. This methodology led the researcher to construct a theory that could explain the processes Black master’s students went through when they began gathering information about graduate school. The theory was identified through photo-elicitation, and provided clarity in understanding the complex nature of their decision-making processes.

The methodology I used in this study was grounded in social constructivist epistemology because the research goal was to create a theory that explained processes (Siemens, 2014). Social constructivist epistemology, which is knowledge, links constructivist grounded theory, which facilitates the construction of a theory, to photo-elicitation, which generates data. Dunn and Ives (2009) claimed, “One of the most coherent responses to social constructivism in the social sciences has been the need to think very carefully about the development of (predominantly qualitative) methodologies” (p. 93). Dunn and Ives (2009) advised researchers to adopt social constructivist grounded theory if they had the worldviews of social constructivists. I hold
a social constructivist worldview, so considered myself to be a social constructivist researcher. For this reason, my research study was rooted in the social constructivist epistemology.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that provided a lens for this study included the predisposition phase, the decision-making process, the research questions, the data sources, and the methodology. This research study focused on the predisposition phase as it related to the Black master’s students. In this phase, students develop a desire to attend college without focusing on which particular institution to attend.

A visual depiction of the conceptual framework is shown in Figure 1 on the following page.
Figure 1.1 The conceptual framework for the study.
Delimitations of the Study

Boundaries and qualifications are required for all research studies (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). The delimitations used in the study were bounded in order to examine the ways in which Black master’s students processed knowledge about graduate school to decide to apply. One delimitation of the study was that it was limited to include only Black full-time master’s students. The dearth of literature led the researcher to set these requirements. Master’s students are likely to have goals and aspirations that differ from those of doctoral students (Jehng, Johnson, & Anderson, 1993; Deem & Brehony, 2000). Additionally, full-time students are likely to have different perspectives than part-time students (MacCann, Fogarty, & Roberts, 2012). The second delimitation was that the subjects had to be enrolled at one institution. This delimitation was set because of time constraints and a lack of financial resources that prevented the study from having a greater scope.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study design and methodology affected the study’s findings. First, the study’s findings could not be generalized beyond the sample of subjects, because a random sample was not used. The sample was limited to include eight individuals at one institution, but Patton (2003) argued that purposeful studies could provide generally useful findings. Second, I was not able to account for events that interfered with a subject’s ability to capture photographs or affected a subject’s responses in the photo-elicitation interview. Third, my status as a graduate student caused some
confusion about whether I was a researcher or a peer. This confusion might have prevented subjects from disclosing some information that was relevant to the study.

**Significance of the Study**

This study addressed the need for a better understanding of how Black master’s students decided to pursue graduate education. Recruiters, administrators, and researchers in higher education could benefit from having a better understanding of how Black undergraduate students gather information to help them decide whether to pursue graduate education. This study also helped develop a better understanding of what factors leads Black undergraduate students to pursue graduate education. Previous studies, such as those by Collins (2012), Hunter (2005), McCallum (2015), and Smith (2005), only investigated how students decided which graduate institutions to attend or how they decided to pursue doctoral degrees. This study examined how Black master’s students decided to pursue master’s degrees, even before they considered which institutions to attend. The subjects were master’s level students because they had different perspectives on graduate education than those who decided to obtain doctoral degrees. Doctoral students have been found to have stronger belief systems and tendencies to think more independently (Jehng, Johnson, & Anderson, 1993). I also decided to study master’s students to further develop Crawford’s (2016) research, which examined the factors that led Black students to pursue undergraduate degrees.

This study also used photo-elicitation, whereas other studies have used more traditional methods to shape an understanding of the processes Black master’s students underwent before enrolling in graduate school. Photo-elicitation interviews provided
opportunities for subjects to reflect on their memories, and it allowed subjects to articulate their thoughts and feelings, which would have likely remained unexpressed in other, traditional interview formats (Rose, 2012). Constructivist grounded theory was significant to the study, because it helped explicate knowledge acquisition processes (Charmaz, 2009). Recruiters, administrators, and scholars will be able to use the results of this study to understand better what factors led Black master’s students to pursue graduate school. This data will help recruiters develop programs or initiatives that provide better opportunities for Black students to enroll in master’s programs. The results of this study will also help them to develop programs that enable Black master’s students to make the most of their higher education journeys.

**Expected Findings**

Previous studies have examined Black graduate students and the decision-making processes that led them to attend particular graduate student institutions through college choice (Perna, 2005), but there is no known study that has examined the process for Black master’s students to decide to pursue graduate school in general before selecting an institution to attend. This study provided a greater understanding of the processes that led Black master’s students to decide to apply for master’s degrees. To this end, I developed a grounded theory that detailed the factors that led Black master’s students’ decisions to pursue graduate degrees. Photo-elicitation allowed me to unpack their complex decision-making processes and develop a theory.
Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the study. I began by presenting a background to the study, defining key terms, and reviewing the statement of the problem. I identified the purpose of the study and the research questions that the study addressed. Next, I gave an overview of the research design, methodology, and analysis techniques. Then I provided the conceptual framework for the study. I delimited the study and discussed the limitations of the study, to be clear about what was included in the research and what was not included. Finally, I discussed the significance of the study and the expected findings.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review provides a synthesis of scholarship surrounding how Black master’s students process knowledge about graduate education. Constructivist grounded theory was the methodological approach used to conceptualize and organize my data. Photo-elicitation served as the method to elicit participant responses to answer the research questions. The primary research question that guided this study was *How do Black master’s students process knowledge about deciding to pursue graduate school?*

Literature cited in this review was limited to primary sources such as empirical studies in journal articles, books, dissertations, and theses about the decision-making process of Black graduate students. This limitation was set to provide a historical perspective to a current review of the topic (Galvan, 2016; Lunenburg & Irby, 2008). This review also included older literature on Black graduate students that represented formative works (Galvan, 2016). Databases used for this review included *ERIC, Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar, EconLit, PsycINFO, SocINDEX, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Full Text.* In addition, I gathered other documents in the form of briefs and policies that contained any information on this topic from organizations that included *Council of Graduate Schools, Survey of Earned Master’s Degrees, and the National Center for Education Statistics.*
Many terms were used to identify literature on how Black master’s students processed knowledge about deciding to pursue graduate school. For readability purposes, I listed these terms in Table 2.1 in no particular order.

Table 2.1

*Search Terms Used to Identify Relevant Literature*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature Search Terms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Pipeline</td>
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<td>Black College Students</td>
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<td>African American College Students</td>
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<td>Master’s Level Students</td>
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<td>Graduate Education</td>
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<td>Cognitive</td>
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<td>Constructivist Grounded Theory</td>
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<td>Recruitment</td>
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<td>Mentoring</td>
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<td>Choice Models</td>
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The outline for the literature review was organized in five main sections: (a) a brief history of the participation of Black students in graduate school, (b) overview of knowledge sources, (c) current recruitment strategies for Black students, (d) choice models, (e) research on Black students’ decision-making process regarding graduate school, and (f) critical moments.

**Historical Perspectives of Black Students Participation in Graduate School**

The history of the participation of Black students in graduate school in comparison to other races is significantly unique because of the critical turning point for Black students’ access to graduate education (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009). Graduate degree programs that emerged in the United States in the mid-19th century were highly populated by White male students (Archbald, 2011). Diversity in graduate education did
not accelerate until after World War I (Berelson, 1960). Graduate programs that enrolled an influx of Black students, notably concentrations on the master’s level, took place in the late 20th century (Baird, 1971). Nevertheless, Gray (2013) reported that Black student participation in graduate education remains a concern today. This section explores the emergence of graduate education in the United States. Following this discussion, I provide a brief overview of the history of Black students participating in graduate degree programs. I narrowed the scope to the history of Black students on the master’s level, rather than including doctorate degree holders; since the master’s level students’ cognitive development stages would look differently as compared to doctoral level students (Baxter, 2004). For these reasons, it was a logical choice to provide historical and current details on graduate education at the master’s level.

Compared to undergraduate education in the United States, graduate education is a relatively new establishment (Berelson, 1960). Carmichael (1961) and Berelson (1960) reported that the first graduate program was established at Harvard in 1872, and John Hopkins University established a graduate school in 1876. Eighty years later, Carmichael (1961) documented that fewer than 200 universities granted the PhD degree, but over 700 granted the master’s degree. Subsequently, 15 years later, Spencer (1986) stated that the Council of Graduate Schools in the United States recognized remediation of undergraduate deficiencies as one sensible purpose of students receiving master’s degrees, rather than attempt to expand their knowledge or to gain higher-order thinking skills as scholars.
Today, a few scholars have argued that the master’s degree is the new bachelor’s degree (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011; Pappano, 2011). In contrast, emergent concerns regarding the proliferation of master’s degrees (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011; Jaeger & Page, 1996; Pappano, 2011) have sparked ongoing debates between a master’s degree and a bachelor’s degree. Gonzales (2001) argued that jobs that once required a bachelor’s degree now require a master’s degree. The most recent of debates stemmed from Carnevale, Strohl, and Smith (2009) demonstrated the need for a master’s degree versus a bachelor’s degree in their work at the *Georgetown University Center on Education and Workforce*. Following Carnevale, Strohl, and Smith’s (2009) argument, universities have researched the benefits of obtaining a master’s degree in a broad perspective such as those at Western Washington University. Barr (2014), the Associate Dean of the Graduate School at Western Washington University stated that there is an “increasingly competitive workforce, where positions calling for a master’s degree will grow more than 20% by 2020” (p. 2). Findings from Barr (2014) revealed that a master’s degree could help individuals towards greater earning potential, academic specialization, advancement in a career or field, and preparation for a doctoral program.

Taylor and Trachtenbery (2009) in *The New York Times* provided a counter-argument questioning the value of a master’s degree from higher education leaders. Taylor and Trachtenbery stated that “the debate presents difficult questions for young people, who face the most difficult economy since the Great Depression” whether or not a master’s degree is worth it, due to the student loan problem (New York Times, 2009, p. 1). Findings from Carnevale and others (2009), and Taylor and Trachtenbery (2009) led
the nation to grapple with the question of a master’s degree’s worth. The solutions included figuring out the percentage of jobs requiring a master’s for the next 20 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012).

In spite of these efforts, the debate continues. Burns (2011) argued that it depends more on the field that the student wants to major in that determines if the payoff is worth it. Burns’s (2011) statement contradicted the Bureau Labor of Statistics (2011) which indicated that it is best for people to advance their education due to future jobs that will be produced later in all fields. Burns (2011) argued against this stating while earnings for students beyond the post-baccalaureate degrees will increase, it is “biology and science majors who will earn 70% more with graduate degrees in those disciplines than those with bachelor’s degrees in the same field and social science workers with graduate degrees earn 55 percent more than their counterparts with bachelor’s degrees” (p.1). According to Brenner’s study (2009), the viewpoint of whether or not a student should advance their education contradicts Burns’s (2011) position. A Dean of a Graduate School in Brenner’s (2009) study stated, “In effect, the answer to the question of ‘is it worth it?’ is this: I am unaware of any study that has ever proven that more education and more guided practice and direct experience has hurt anyone or negatively impacted someone's life over a lifetime” (p. 1). While scholars are likely to continue having debates about the payoffs to increasing one’s education in specific fields of study such as hard science versus social sciences, the results are beyond the scope of this study.
Overview of Information Sources

As Berelson (1960) claimed and Barr (2014) later asserted, the importance of graduate education is paramount because of the higher-order thinking skills that it demands and of the higher earnings from obtaining it. Although these components are essential, one may ask, how do these individuals come to find out to know the importance of obtaining a graduate education and where does this information stems from for students.

Information is dispersed to students about education based on expectations (Jacob & Wilder, 2010; Manski, 1993). Jacob and Wilder (2010) argued that “expectation formation is a complex process: individuals do not have access to the same information and likely weight various factors differently in determining expectations” (p. 15). Therefore, students formulate information about educational expectations through individual-level factors such as a “student’s personal characteristics, family socioeconomic background, social class, academic history, as well as numerous other social and cultural resources found in a youth’s network” (Stewart, Stewart, & Simons, 2007, p. 896).

Stewart, Stewart, and Simons’ (2007) study revealed that Black students gather information and produce educational expectations through their social contexts. Additionally, the same applies for Latinos. Latinos access to information about educational expectancies derives from their culture and their parents low levels of education (Bohen, Johnson, & Gorman, 2006). Therefore, their access to information about education may be limited in comparison to other racial groups. Polar opposites are
Asian students, whose parents “may view education as the best means to overcome discrimination and other barriers to achieving high social status” (Goyette & Yu Xie, 1999, p. 23). Through efforts to overcome these barriers, Asians are traditionally exposed to various educational opportunities, which lead them to have more access to information about education. In a similar vein, most White students have family expectations that they achieve credentials beyond the post-secondary level (Perna, 2000). Therefore, White students’ access to information regarding education may differ from Latino and Black students. The commonality among all racial groups is that each group develops information about education through the expectations of their families. Although there is a much broader range of student access to information about education such as through teachers and peers, the central location of information and expectation seems to focus on families (Bohen, Johnson, & Gorman, 2006; Goyette & Yu Xie, 1999; Perna, 2000).

Although students receive information about graduate education in the form of educational expectations from their families, the undergraduate experience plays a critical role on how students retrieve information about graduate education. Researchers have applied Astin’s theory of involvement (Astin, 1993) and Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of student departure to how students gather information about graduate education and their desire to pursue graduate education.

Astin’s (1993) theory of involvement posits that students acquire information by becoming involved (Ethington & Smart, 1986). For example, faculty/student relationships can influence students positively if a student is involved in their professor’s research while learning from the professor (Guiffrida, 2005). This may result in
persistence and the student pursuing more education beyond their baccalaureate. Tinto’s (1975) model of undergraduate student persistence, theorized that the degree of social and academic integration experienced by students influences persistence toward graduation (Ethington & Smart, 1986). This notion also led Tinto (1975) to consider the educational environment factors that may encourage students to pursue more education. For example, attending racial workshops, engaging in research projects, and interacting with faculty are all factors that seem to influence educational aspirations (Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002; Tinto, 1993). These activities are forms of social and academic integrations referred to in Tinto’s model (1975, 1993, 1997).

Coupling Astin’s (1993) theory of involvement and Tinto’s (1975) theory model of undergraduate student persistence may explain how Black student leaders’ involvement on campus plays a significant role in their overall undergraduate experience. Black students being involved in student organization may influence their educational aspirations even more to pursue more education (Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). Students in leadership positions may have a higher level of commitment and responsibilities that can engage them more to have a better holistic experience versus the other students who chose not to hold leadership positions.

Furthermore, researchers such as Astin (1993) and Tinto (1975) developed models to determine which environmental factors influenced the most persistence toward education, but during the time when the models were developed, the majority of students that participated in graduate school were mainly White male students (Guiffrida, 2003). Guiffrida (2003) argued that these models can not be applied to all students, especially to
Black students. To that end, theories and literature about how Black students produce knowledge from their environment, even graduate students, is almost nonexistent.

The gap in the literature regarding what is known about Black students and how they come to find out about information to obtain graduate education has sparked repeated calls for graduate school recruitment administrators, researchers, and policymakers to address. Researchers of Black graduate students argued that in comparison to what is known about Black undergraduate students, knowledge about Black graduate students is practically nonexistent (Strayhorn, Williams, Tillman-Kelly, & Suddeth, 2013). In particular, not enough is known about the educational process through which the decision is made to enter graduate school.

Of a similar mind, McCallum (2015) advocated for more research about Black students post-baccalaureate pursuits, since it is a “multistep process” in the decision to go to graduate school (p. 51). In Ethington and Smart’s (1986) study of the educational process through which the decision is made to enter graduate school, they noted that research on how graduate students process information concerning graduate school has not been frequent or systematically robust. Nearly 30 years after Ethington and Smart’s (1986) study, calls to address the gap in knowledge of the educational process for Black graduate students remained (Grays, 2013). In particular, there is no known study to address this from Black students’ standpoint. Gray (2013) argued, “Exemplar models for recruiting minority students should be examined. Accountability measures should be established in order that deliberate action is taken in the recruitment of African American graduate students” (p. 78). In particular, Gray (2013) called for studies to address
strategies on how to get more Black students to enroll in graduate school and for there to be accountability measures. Gray (2013) proposed that one must examine how students process this information themselves. Therefore, this study aimed to address gaps illuminated in several questions raised by Gray (2013), McCallum (2015), and Strayhorn et al. (2013); notably, by examining how Black master’s students process knowledge regarding decisions to pursue graduate school.

The Current Recruitment Strategies for Black Students in Higher Education

Despite continuing questions about the educational process or the multi-process for Black graduate students, as a whole, few current recruitment strategies for these individuals are effective in getting them into graduate school (Freeman, 1997; Johnson, 2015; Strayhorn, 2005). Researchers and policymakers have made significant contributions in determining the mechanisms to get Black students to attend college. For example, many institutions have recognized the considerable task to attract and recruit Black college students into higher education. Freeman’s (1997) study specifically explored Black high-school students’ perceptions of barriers to participation in higher education. The study also explored their perceptions of effective programs for addressing the barriers (Freeman, 1997). In particular, Freeman’s (1997) study asked two primary questions: (a) what are barriers African American face in their decision to participate in higher education, and (b) what are the solutions that African American students recommend to increase African Americans’ participation in higher education? These questions in multiple studies for many years have been addressed (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Strayhorn, 2005).
Twenty years later, Gray’s (2013) study looked at the recruitment strategies for Black graduate students over a ten-year period. Gray examined the recruiting practices at the University of Arkansas by interviewing college deans, faculty, graduate coordinators, recruiters from the various departments, and personnel from the Office of Graduate Recruitment and Support Services to identify the best practices in the recruitment of Black graduate students. Recommendations for effectively recruiting Black graduate students were that each college department must take an active role. This role included each department having training in areas that taught about diversity and rewards. Incentives were provided to departments that brought about more inclusion were provided. Freeman’s (1997) and Gray’s (2013) research study aided in increasing the number of Black students in higher education at the undergraduate and graduate levels by developing many supports and strategies. We see a growing number of programs geared towards this population of students to encourage them to participate in higher education. The wide-array of programs included, but were not limited to federal, Trio programs, dual enrollment, and state-level reforms on the undergraduate level (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Recruitment strategies specifically for the graduate level includes graduate student fairs and conferences, summer research programs, and campus visitation programs (Griffin & Muniz, 2011). These programs are set as strategies ranging from academic preparation to psychosocial and behavioral supports for many Black students to participate in higher education.

**Recruitment Issues for Black Students in Graduate School**
Despite the prolific number of scholars that explored ways to increase the number of Black students in higher education (Freeman, 1997; Gray, 2013; Griffin & Muniz, 2011; Johnson, 2015; Strayhorn, 2005; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013), little is known on recruitment issues that deter Black students from deciding to pursue graduate school (Johnson-Bailey, 2007). Support and strategies play a critical role regarding efforts to increase the number of Black students in higher education, but addressing recruitment issues will assist in developing support and strategies to increase the number of Black students in higher education.

Throughout the past 60 years of Black students pursuing graduate degrees, Black students have consistently lacked the necessary support such as financial, faculty/staff encouragement, and more (Allen, 1992; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Strayhorn, 2005; Thomas, 1981; Warren, 1954). Johnson-Bailey (2007) stated that the major issues that have affected recruitment of Black graduate students have been the lack of accessibility and encouragement from departments’ graduate coordinators. The graduate coordinators are essentially the gatekeepers (Sternberg, Gabora, & Bonney, 2012). Quaterman (2008) stated the practical recruitment issues for potential Black graduate students was the lack of recruitment fairs and career days at Historical Black College and Universities (HBCU), and the availability of financial resources. The common thread in both Johnson-Bailey’s (2007) and Quartman’s (2008) work was the lack of support for increasing the number of Black students in graduate school. The lack of support centered on encouragement, even when Black students were interested in graduate school, and create opportunities to expose Black students to graduate school and financial assistance.
Choice Models of Decision-Making

Understanding how to recruit students through supports and strategies is critical, but many institutions have persisted in the belief that modifying their recruitment mechanisms can affect students' choice of college (Chapman, 1981). The modeling to examine the factors influencing students in their decision on which university or college to attend is choice modeling (Kallio, 1995). To unpack the notion of choice models further, Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) defined college choice as a "complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university or institution of advanced vocational training" (p. 7).

Models of graduate college choice are nearly non-existent (Kallio, 1995). As a result, researchers have borrowed from the undergraduate literature (Hosseler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989; Hosseler & Gallager, 1987; Paulsen, 1990). Publications that have reviewed and summarized the choice models are too many to recognize in this literature review. The choice models in this literature review are the ones that I sought to be applicable to graduate students and/or Black students. These models are descriptive theories, which “set out to describe how people think when making decisions” (Beresford & Sloper, 2008). This review describes the evolution of several conceptual models of the choice process starting with Chapman’s (1981) simple decision-making student choice funnel and progressing toward more integrative and complex choice models such as Perna (2006). The lens of this grounded theory research utilized components of each
theoretical model below to discover the factors that led Black students to decide to pursue graduate school.

**Chapman’s Model of Student Choice**

Chapman’s (1981) model of student college choice viewed external influences on student choice. These external forces included: (a) significant persons, (b) fixed college characteristics, and (c) college efforts to communicate with prospective students. Furthermore, student characteristics included level of educational aspiration, high school performance, socio-economic status (SES), and aptitude (Chapman, 1981). As a pioneering college choice model in the field, Chapman’s (1981) model’s drawback is that some of the influences have evolved since its emergence. Thirty years later, the vehicles for communication to perspective students have changed drastically, even for graduate students. These communication channels include the use of websites, emails, all forms of social media, and conferences.

**Hossler and Gallagher Choice Model**

Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) work on student college choice is a synthesis of the work of a number of contemporaries (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed a three-phase model of college choice for high school students. The three phases are: (a) awareness of attending college, (b) seeking of information and consideration of choices, and (c) final decision (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The researchers stated that students move toward an increased awareness of their educational opportunities and are influenced by individual and organizational factors as
they progress through the three phases (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The three phases are outline as follows:

1. **Predisposition (Phase 1)** – In the first phase, students determine whether they want to pursue higher education. The factors considered in this phase are a student’s background characteristics, significant others, educational activities, and other factors that formulate a student’s desire to pursue postsecondary education (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

2. **Search (Phase 2)** – After a student has formulated a desire to pursue higher education, the student gathers information about various colleges and forms a “choice set” of colleges that matches their criteria, unconsciously or consciously. A student’s preliminary values and criteria, their search activities about higher education in general, and their search activities of colleges drive the search process phase (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

3. **Choice (Phase 3)** – Once a student has identified a number of possible colleges, the student decides to which college they will apply. The final choice is not only driven by the colleges the student would like to pursue, but also the competing activities of other colleges getting the attention of the student (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) concluded that the optimum time for colleges to influence perspective students is during the choice phase. The researchers suggested that colleges take a proactive stance in dispensing information about higher education programs, tuition, financial assistance, and other factors critical to students in the search
phase. By implementing these suggestions, colleges are at their optimum level for recruitment.

Though Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model embodied a detailed combination of then current research in the field, it was lacking in a few areas. First, a majority of participants in the studies stated they used in the model were traditional college-ready high school students. The researchers’ assumption was that these students represented the primary audience that colleges desired to recruit (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), however, other researchers (Bowl, 2003; Levin, 2006; Melkun, 2012; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Perna, 2000) stated that current postsecondary population is increasingly nontraditional, especially with increased enrollment of Black students.

A second shortcoming of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) work was the oversight for postsecondary students. The researchers failed to address how this model may in fact be applied to postsecondary students deciding to pursue graduate school. In addition, the researchers failed to see how this model could be applied to current graduate students and serve as a reflective tool to see how students decided to pursue graduate school.

Another shortcoming overlooked of the predisposition phase. In this stage, students decide to pursue higher education. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provided many factors as to why students would decide to pursue higher education; however, the factors are not applicable enough to non-traditional students. For example, family expectations may lead Black students to pursue higher education. Furthermore, this may be the identical implication for Black students in the phase of applying for graduate school.
The last shortcoming in Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) work is the traditional methods utilized in their studies. Considering these researchers forwarded this model 30 years ago, it is unlikely that unconventional research methods were used to determine how students decided to pursue higher education. In a current empirical study on this choice model, researchers Surla and Poon (2015) argued how visual methods are effective to illustrate and verbally explain how students experienced the college choice process. Therefore, considerations in how participants are interviewed in terms of understanding a “process” should be made.

In summary, reliance on Hosseler and Gallagher’s (1987) model “may lead institutions to make inappropriate assumptions about potential students and thereby fail to recruit and retain them effectively” (Southerland, 2006, p. 9). Especially in regards to non-traditional students from different racial backgrounds either on the postsecondary or post-bachelorette levels. However, this model is significant because it was tailored to how students process knowledge about education. The awareness of attending higher education and how one gathers information about higher education overlapped with the purpose of this study.

**Cabrera and La Nasa Choice Model**

Cabrea and La Nasa (2000) developed a college choice model that contained three stages of college choice and consisted of multiple factors and outcomes at each stage. The three stages in the model were situated by grade levels: (a) 7th – 9th predisposition, (b) 10th – 12th search, and (c) 11th – 12th choice. Each of these three stages led to cognitive and affective development producing factors to understand the process. Though
this model started with seventh graders, it was significant because it was an indication that students may start thinking about graduate school in their earlier stages of life. My study borrowed the “predisposition” stage from this model.

Predisposition stage is defined as a “development of occupational and educational aspirations” (Cabrea & La Nasa, 2000, p. 2). In this stage, students gain facts, information, and awareness about pursuing post-secondary education in general. The factors that influence them at this stage are parental encouragement, parents involved in school matters, more discussion about college by guidance counselors and parents, and students developing “mental pictures of the institutions under consideration” (Cabrea & La Nasa, 2000, p. 2). Furthermore, these images lead students to form predispositions. This study focused on this stage in regards to Black college students and graduate school. The predisposition stage occurs even before college choice becomes a consideration.

Perna Choice Model

Perna (2006) created a four-layer college choice model. The four layers in the model are: (a) social, (b) economic, (c) school and community context, and (d) habitus. These four layers includes context of how college choice is decided. Through its credit of the “multiple layers of context,” the proposed conceptual model incorporates the perspectives of four major stakeholders in the college-choice process: (a) students (and their parents), (b) K-12 institutions, (c) higher education institutions, and (d) public policymakers (Perna, 2006, p. 119). This model is widely known in the college choice field (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2010).
Although used by many researchers, some of the tenets are not the focus for this dissertation study.

**Research on Factors that Influence the Decision Making Process for Black Graduate Students**

Although choice modeling is used to examine factors that influence students in their decision on which college to attend, it is not applicable for graduate student choice (Kallio, 1995). Furthermore, it is not applicable for understanding the ways in which Black students go about deciding to pursue graduate education in general. In particular, there is no known study that examines how Black students process facts, information, and awareness about graduate school in deciding to pursue graduate school. In a few of the studies conducted, most used decision-making models to research factors that influenced school choice for Black graduate students (Allen, 1992; Freeman, 1997; Griffin & Muniz, 2011), rather than factors that influenced students’ decisions to pursue graduate education in general. Other research about Black students in pursuit of graduate school used traditional methods (Johnson-Bailey, 2007; Quaterman, 2008; Strayhorn, 2005) rather than using a nontraditional method to understand the complex process. Some studies about recruitment of Black graduate students exists (Gray, 2013; Johnson, 2015; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013), but recruitment of Black graduate students is not always a predictor that it is effective (Johnson-Bailey, 2007). My study examined the process as a criterion for finding factors that led Black students to decide to pursue graduate school.

A few studies on how Black graduate students process knowledge about graduate education in the U.S. were found in a bibliographic database search. The literature included Collins (2012) and Smith (2005) who investigated factors that influenced the
decision of Black students to attend graduate school. Hunter (2006) provided useful findings on factors influencing school choice for Black graduate students. Because family members play an important role in the decision-making process of Black graduate students pursuing graduate degrees, McCallum’s (2015) study about how families influence the decision of Black students to attend graduate school may shed further light on what is known and unknown about Black graduate students. The remainder of the literature was specifically directed toward understanding Black graduate students and what influences them to advance their education was anecdotal, and the study did not explore how the students process facts, information, and awareness about graduate school (Gloria et al., 1999; Knight & Mattick, 2006; Maringe & Carter, 2007). This left unanswered questions about how this population of students process knowledge to decide to pursue graduate education.

There are also findings, from the few empirical studies found, on specific factors that influence Black students’ decision to attend graduate school and how they select the graduate school of their choice. Smith (2005) examined factors that affected Black students’ decisions to attend graduate or professional school. Smith used a mixed method study at two different institutions of higher education, a historically Black college and university (HBCU) and a predominately White institution (PWI) with 128 Black undergraduate students. The ecological framework guided the theoretical approach. Smith found that none of the students indicated that their undergraduate institutions had an impact on their decision to continue their education. Additionally, the data indicated that there was a significant difference in the number of students who wanted to pursue
graduate education from the HBCU institutions, versus those from the PWI institutions. Black students from the HBCU institutions wanted to pursue graduate education more so than did the Black students from the PWI institutions. Peer support and mentor involvement played an important role for students planning to continue their education, though the greatest impact came from students’ families as being the social agent ultimately responsible for the desire to continue their education.

Hunter (2006) conducted a nonexperimental exploratory design, intended to identify factors influencing the law school choice of prospective Black students in the state of Texas. The study included 299 Black students who participated in a survey. Participants in the study were enrolled in eight of the nine law schools in the state of Texas. Hunter (2006) found that factors which affected the law school choice of Black students in Texas were minority faculty and staff, social, financial aid, and career factors. Additionally, a second group titled “marketing” factors was meant to determine the level of influence these factors posed during the school choice process. He found that contact was significant in their decisions or pursuing their law degrees at their chosen institutions. This included contact with the admissions staff, financial aid communications, the frequency and quality of mail communications, contact with current students, contact with faculty, and contact with alumni.

Although Smith (2005) and Hunter (2006) examined factors influencing the decisions of Black students to attend graduate or professional school, these two studies had slightly different approaches. Unlike Smith’s (2005) study, Hunter’s (2006) study looked at factors influencing school choice, rather than what was responsible for the
students’ desire to continue their education. Furthermore, Smith (2005) and Hunter (2006) gave contradictory information in justifying their attention on the influences of decision making for students. Smith’s (2005) study found the greatest impact came from students’ families being their social agent, meaning their families held them accountable to pursue more education. Hunter’s (2006) study found that, minority faculty and staff were the main factors accounting for the desire to pursue more education at a law school.

Therefore, it is unclear as to the major factors that affect Black students in their pursuit of graduate school.

Collins (2012) also explored factors that influenced Black students to attend graduate school. Collins’ (2012) study utilized Perna’s (2006) proposed college choice model, which compared the benefits and costs shaped by individual’s habitus. Furthermore, the purpose of Collins’ (2012) study was to identify the issues (i.e., financial aid, academic achievement, habitus, school and community, and higher education context) that influenced Black college graduates to enroll in graduate school. Collin’s (2012) study differed from the scope of Smith’s (2005) and Hunter’s (2006) studies because it was an 18-year longitudinal study of a cohort of Black students. Therefore, the retrospective format of data was another key difference between the prior studies of Smith (2005) and Hunter (2006). After years of study, Collins (2012) ultimately found three variables significantly contributed to graduate enrollment for Black students that consisted of GPA, Pell grant amount, and parental education. Moreover, the analysis conducted by the author showed that the habitus and the school and community context helped to make the Black students’ graduate college choice.
McCallum’s (2015) study provided insight into how Black students make the decision to enroll in doctoral programs and the ways family members contribute to that process. Unlike Smith’s (2005), Hunter’s (2006), and Collins’ (2012) studies, McCallum’s (2015) study participants were doctoral students. McCallum (2015) found five themes to describe the ways family members contributed to participants’ doctoral decision-making process: (a) College Is Not An Option, (b) Graduate School Expectations, (c) Motivation through Narratives of Oppression, (d) Networks of Support, and (e) Community Parenting (p. 54). Although McCallum’s (2015) study consisted of PhD students, the key themes can also be applied to Black master level students. McCallum’s (2015) study was the only study in the literature review that did not focus on Black graduate school choice.

Collins’ (2012) findings of Black students’ decisions of wanting to pursue graduate school indicated that participants looked to their GPA, Pell grant amount, and parental education as the source for their decisions. Collins’ (2012) work also confirmed some of Smith’s (2005) and McCallum’s (2015) findings; in all three studies participants revealed that family dynamics played a significant role in their pursuits of wanting to increase their education on the graduate level. Hunter’s (2006) study viewed the marketing factors that influenced Black students to pursue more education, which garnered the attention of recruitment administrators and researchers. Nonetheless, these studies leave remaining questions about how Black college students process facts, information, and awareness in deciding to pursue graduate school while only lending suggestions on how to recruit Black master’s students.
Critical Moments

The conventional notions of decision-making processes have been mentioned throughout the mainstream literature (Collins, 2012; Hunter, 2006; McCallum, 2015; Smith, 2005), but there has been a lack of information noted about critical moments, which occur at the end of the decision-making process (Langley, 1995). Langley (1995) stated that these two concepts are continuously disjointed. Critical moments refer to “the decision” and “final choice” (Langley, 1995, p. 264). Researchers who observe these moments want participants in their studies to “step back into their past by reflecting on their experience and identifying important events that represented critical shifts” (Wei, 2011, p. 1124). Although no known study existed that examined Black masters students’ critical moments in their decision-making process, researchers have argued that critical moments are essential to study (Langley, 1995; Thomon et al., 2012; Wei, 2011).

Critical moments address two contexts: emotional and social (Thomson et al., 2002). Verweij, Senior, Domínguez, and Turner (2015) found that emotions can be linked to an individual making a “final decision” about a matter. LeDoux (2002) defined emotion as “the process by which the brain determines or computes the value of a stimulus” (p. 201). The researchers Verweij et al. (2015) argued that, “emotions, and especially social emotions (such as empathy, joy, spite, jealously), are pivotal for decision-making” (p. 3). Ultimately, individuals can make final decisions based on a positive or negative emotion (Kandel, 2011).

Ridley (2004) stated that when individuals are in a socially situated space these are when critical moments take place. Of a similar mind, Cottone (2001) stated critical
moments during a social discourse are established. Cottone (2001) stated, “Language is not generated spontaneously; it is socially transmitted. All that is done (in language or otherwise) is bound to heritage. Decisions, therefore, cannot be located ‘in’ the individual” (Cottone, 2001, p. 40). Cottone elaborated stating “decisions are not compelled internally; rather they are socially compelled. This is the social constructivism position” (p. 79).

Chapter Summary

As noted throughout this chapter, the decision-making process of how Black students gather knowledge to decide to pursue graduate school needs to be studied. Collins (2012), Hunter (2006), McCallum (2015), and Smith (2005) were researchers who reported on factors influencing the decision of Black students to attend a particular graduate school or they focused on doctoral students. Furthermore, common threads among all these studies were that researchers utilized traditional methods or focused on college choice. Attuned to how Black graduate students process knowledge about furthering their education should be more recruitment administrators and researchers, such as understanding conscious choice for students to seek guidance for graduate school, to apply, and to enroll in at a particular institution.

Missing from the literature is research describing the process of how Black students decide to pursue graduate school while focusing solely on master’s students. Theoretical models describing how these students process knowledge about graduate school are notably absent. An emergent, visual methodology, called photo-elicitation provides an opportunity to gain valuable information about how Black students decide to
pursue graduate school through participant-generated photographs. Additionally, constructivist grounded theory provides a framework to unpack and analyze the data gathered through this visual methodology. Chapter Three provides the specific procedures of this examination.
CHAPTER THREE

STUDY METHODS

Introduction

This chapter includes the systematic steps in the data generation and analysis processes that answered my research questions. The chapter is comprised of four parts: (a) rationale for research design, (b) university context, (c) instruments used to generate data, and (d) data analysis procedures.

The purpose of this study was to examine how current Black master’s degree students processed facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. The objective was to determine the processes current Black master’s degree students followed when they decided to attend graduate school. To accomplish this objective, I examined the main factors that led these Black students to pursue graduate school and the critical moments that influenced their ultimate decision to apply. Data from study participants provided the basis for constructing a theory. Following Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval, I enlisted the participation of eight current master’s degree Black students. The overarching research question that guided my work was How do Black master’s students process knowledge about deciding to pursue graduate school?

Secondary research questions included the following: (1) What factors led Black master’s degree students to apply to graduate school? and (2) What were the critical moments that influenced Black master’s degree students’ decisions to apply to graduate school? A constructivist grounded theory of the knowledge from photo-elicitation interviews will be the outcome of this study.
For generating data, I utilized multiple data sources including participant's information (photographs, hashtags, and interviews), field notes, journal entries, member-checks, and conversations with a critical friend. Each participant took five photographs and wrote captions in the form of hashtags about why the event, thing, or person(s) in the photographs assisted them in deciding to pursue a master’s degree. Participants had five days to capture the photographs before meeting with me to discuss the photographs in a photo-elicitation interview. The goal of the photo-elicitation interview was twofold: (a) to obtain additional information about the photos each participants took, and (b) to evoke deeper and more personal reflexive narratives (Harper, 2002) about the process each participant took before deciding to pursue a master’s degree. Furthermore, the intent of the photo-elicitation interviews was to unpack the factors that led participants to apply for graduate school.

Additionally, I utilized a field instrument that helped me capture my own thoughts and subjectivities that arose while I was conducting the interviews. Finally, data analysis for the hashtag photographs and interview transcripts included Charmaz’s (2006) four types of coding: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, (c) selective coding, and (d) theoretical coding.

**Rationale for the Research Design**

Crotty (2003) stated that consideration be made in regards to the interconnection among epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods as it relates to the research to improve the rigor of a study. Figure 3.1 displays the relationship among the four elements and keywords associated with each.
Social Constructionism

Epistemology refers to what is considered knowledge and the premise for such knowledge (Crotty, 2003). This study utilized a social constructionism worldview, which posits that knowledge is constructed and not discovered (Scotland, 2012). Specifically, all knowledge is determined by observing the world through a single perspective with every individual having a quantifiable and discoverable nature focused on the dynamics of social interaction (Crotty, 2003). Additionally, social constructionists believe that individuals make meaning of their own experiences and create knowledge through relationships and social interactions using various types of communication (written, spoken or other forms of communicating) (Crotty, 2003). Rizer and Goodman (2004) asserted that individuals make sense of the world around them by reflecting on socially supported traditions, practices, and procedures (Gergen, 1999). In social constructionism terms, taken-for-granted realities are developed between social agents (Crotty, 2003). These realities are the seldom-used forms of knowledge that many individuals overlook.
Constructivism

Constructivism served as the theoretical perspective for the study methodology and method (Creswell, 2012). To elaborate, the constructivist perspective, which embraces the notion that people create meaning based on their own experiences (Crotty, 2003). This approach also supported how one collects and analyses data. Constructivist inquiry starts with a person's experiences and critically examines how individuals construct that experience. Ultimately, the constructivist's objective is to enter the worldview of their participants, gain multiple perspectives from it, and then situate those perspectives within a context described by study participants.

Guided by tenets of the conceptual framework (See Figure 1.1), this study consisted of my decision-making processes and research questions; however, it does not fully address my worldview. The theoretical framework influenced my data collection procedures and data analysis.

Constructivist Grounded Theory Methodology

A complimentary methodology to my worldview and theoretical perspective directed my study. Methodology is the “strategy or plan of action that lies behind the selection and use of particular methods” (Crotty, 1998. p. 3). Thus, methodology is concerned with “why, what, from where, when and how data is collected and analyzed” (Scotland, 2012, p. 9). Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain that methodology addresses the question “How can the inquirer go about finding out whatever they believe can be known?” (p. 108). The methodological approach for this study was constructivist
grounded theory whose purpose is to form a theory grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Grounded theory first developed through the partnership of Glaser and Strauss (1967), to be a “systematic, inductive, and comparative approach for conducting inquiry” for the use of constructing theory initially (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 1). Grounded theorist’s (Bryant, 2002; Charmaz, 2009; Glaser, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 2014) purport to collect data, seek out core themes that generate a theory, which can be analyze, and tested (Moghaddam, 2006). Terms of philosophical stances of the methodology can differ from researcher to researcher. Glaser (2002) and Bryant (2002) took a positivistic approach which means they had an objective stance and claimed the “existence of one single reality; one absolute truth” (Kennedy & Lingard, 2006, p. 102). Strauss and Corbin (2014) also made assumptions that grounded theory is a general positivistic or constructionist methodology. Charmaz (2009) adopted a constructivist stance. Researchers who employ the constructivist paradigm assume that reality or knowledge is socially constructed and values multiple truths (Charmaz, 2006; Mertens, 2005). Therefore, the current study used a constructivist approach through in-depth interviewing to discern how individuals create complex knowledge about their lives and choices using a socially constructed lens.

Green, Creswell, Shope, and Plano-Clark (2007) stated that grounded theory is ideally suitable for studying Black individuals. The researchers posited that the theory addresses “issues of process that may yield theoretical perspectives germane to diverse populations and embrace the perspectives of people of color to be valued” (p.473). Since
grounded theory values the perspectives of Black people then this theory can lead to more reliable interview data that is consistent with participants’ beliefs and behaviors. Guiffrida (2005) echoed this notion and noted that grounded theory is most applicable for understanding Black students' perspectives. Therefore, constructivist grounded theory fit with the needs and desired outcomes for the current study because I sought to examine how Black master’s students’ process knowledge about graduate school prior to enrolling. The outcome of this information is to provide recruitment administrators and scholars with a different perspective on how Black students decide to pursue graduate-level education.

**Photo-Elicitation Method**

The aforementioned studies (Smith, 2005; Hunter, 2006; Collins, 2012; McCallum, 2015) provided useful information about the decision-making process for Black graduate students on attending graduate school and college choice. Those researchers used traditional methods such as interviews and surveys to collect data. Methodologists Harper (2002), Packard (2008), and Rose (2012) argued that methods such as traditional interviews and surveys might hinder participants from openly sharing what they think and feel about certain topics because of research design limitations. Methods that compel participants to explore complex realities, such as photo-elicitation, may offer a different perspective on how students process knowledge about pursuing graduate education more than traditional methods such as structured interviews and focus groups.
Photo-elicitation is “inserting pictures into a research interview” (Harper, 2007, p. 13). Developed from anthropological research, photo-elicitation first documented in Collier’s (1957) study, incorporated photographs to understand the impact of environmental stressors on neighborhoods and families. Furthermore, there have been other visual material used in research studies such as photo-voice, photo-essays, photo-documenting, paintings, cartoons, and public displays such as graffiti, advertising billboards, or any visual image (Collier, 1957). There is some confusion in the literature between photo-elicitation and photo-voice, so it is useful to clarify the differences between the two methods (Rose, 2012). Photo-voice is normally a longitudinal study that aims to change the conditions of an environment. Furthermore, photo-voice is a participatory action research method that allows the researcher and participants to collaborate for change (Wang, 2000). The pictures, in return, are coded using content analysis (Rose, 2012). On the contrary, photo-elicitation takes place over a few weeks and the pictures generate rich, in-depth conversation when compared to traditional interviews (Frith & Harcourt, 2007). The intent of the study was not to change the conditions of the environment, rather to elicit deeper conversations for reflection purposes. This distinction explains why photo-elicitation is the preferable method in the current study.

In the next section, I provide strengths of using photo-elicitation as a method to use when conducting a constructivist grounded theory study. Visual methodologists such as Collier and Collier (1986), Harper (2012), Lapenta (2011), and Rose (2012) help to articulate the strengths to this method.
**Strengths of Photo-Elicitation**

Rose (2012) posited there are four major strengths of photo-elicitation. First, photo-elicitation provides a space for participants to express knowledge and insights in their own words. Second, photo-elicitation has the ability to generate emotions that can be valuable in a research study. Rose (2012) stated that the ability to generate emotions could be an affective measure that enhances information gathered from other types of methods. Third, photo-elicitation interviews give participants an active voice in the study (Rose, 2012). Unlike other research methods, this method provides participants with valuable knowledge about themselves or society they might not have thought about prior to the study. Fourth, photo-elicitation interviews can serve as a reflexive tool (Rose, 2012). Therefore, photo-elicitation interviews can enhance a deeper level of reflective thinking, which is a significant reason for using this method in the current study.

Other visual researchers have echoed similar strengths to using photo-elicitation as a means of collaboration between the participant and the researcher. Harper (2002) believed that, “When two or more people discuss the meaning of photographs, [then] they try to figure out something together” (p.14). Lapenta (2011) found that collaboration between the researcher and participant builds rust and rapport, which is critical because it allows interactional interview dynamics while increasing access to information. Collier and Collier (1986) stated that when a researcher struggles to create a genuine relationship with study participants then photo-elicitation is an acceptable method. Furthermore, psychologically, photos can function as a third party in an interview session, which reduces ‘awkwardness’ between the participant and the researcher (Collier & Collier,
Thus, photos have the tendency to reduce some discomforts during interviews since there is something to focus on, and it serves as a tool to connect the researcher and the participant by building immediate rapport (Collier & Collier, 1986).

**Challenges to Photo-Elicitation**

Challenges to using photo-elicitation is not without its critics. Bugus (2014) argued that despite photo-elicitation growing in popularity, only a few publications have detailed the challenges of conducting photo-elicitation interviews (Lapenta, 2011; Rose, 2012) which means there is a gap in studies on this method. Few scholars have examined this emergent methodology. Researchers that employ visual methodologies in their studies should be explicit about why this methodology is most suitable to studying a given phenomenon (Rose, 2012).

The emergent method of using photographs has many concerns because it lacks clear processes or instructions for study participants (Wang & Burris, 1997). This notion has led many researchers to question the validity and reliability of research designs that pertain to this method (Harper 2002; Wang & Burris, 1997; Rose, 2012). To reduce questions of validity and reliability, one may need to engage in triangulation to receive informant feedback or respondent validation. If a study is without clear direction, then one needs to improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013).

One of the most valuable ways that photo-elicitation is useful in studies is how researchers and participants co-create knowledge. (Loeffler, 2004; Reese, 2014), Methodologists such as Loeffler (2004) and Reese (2014) argued that the use of visual
methods may lead participants to focus more on observable objects or self-portraits instead of abstract concepts that could help with their knowledge creation. Although this may be a challenge with participants these types of problems can be minimized using proper training with specific examples and instructions on how to use digital cameras or smartphones to assist with the research process (Wang & Burris, 1997, Rose 2012).

**Ethical Considerations of Photo-Elicitation**

In addition to challenges associated with photo-elicitation, researchers that utilize this method have to address ethical concerns. The American Educational Research Association (2008) provided three ethical standards for conducting any research with human subjects: (a) research studies must be for the social betterment of our society, (b) the vulnerable population must be protected, and (c) researchers must maintain integrity for the research community. Furthermore, the Institutional Review Board (2014) and the American Psychological Association (APA)’s *Publication Manual, 6th edition* (2010) echoed similar standards.

Though every researcher must adhere to these rules and guidelines, visual materials incorporated in a study have additional procedures to follow. The three significant ethical matters for visual materials are: (a) consent, (b) anonymity, and (c) copyright (Rose, 2012). For example, photo-elicitation is the process of capturing photos of not only participants in a study but may include other individuals as well (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). Therefore, consent is critical from all individuals that are featured in the image. Anonymity means that the names of study participants and places, if needed, must
be protected (Qian & Scott, 2007). Lastly, copyright means that the researcher should not reproduce the work of the participants unless given permission (APA, 2010).

**Variability uses of Photo-Elicitation**

Despite the ethical challenges mentioned, photo-elicitation is common research method across a range of disciplines including education, sociology, psychology, health, history, and the arts (Harper, 2002). Collier (1956) posited that photos generate richer information that evokes greater emotion, retrieves better memory, and encourages self-empowerment for participants than more traditional methods (Harper, 2010; Harper, 2002). Furthermore, photo-elicitation has been used across different demographic groups (Harper, 2002). Additionally, a myriad of studies have utilized photo-elicitation to explore perspectives of children (Cappello, 2005; Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, & Baruchel, 2006; Punch 2002). Others scholars have conducted studies to examine family dynamics and Black individuals (Douglas, 1997; Harrison & Lawrence, 2003; Miller 2014). In fact, Harper (2002) found photo-elicitation to be the primary methodology in 40 studies, including dissertations, books, articles, and reports ranging from 1978-2001. Overall, four key areas photo-elicitation studies have concentrated on are “(a) social organization/social class, (b) community, (c) identity, and (d) culture” (Harper, 2002, p. 16).

Utilized in over 40 studies, the use of photo elicitation remains underutilized despite its contributions to research (Harper, 2002; Rose, 2012; Reese, 2013). Additionally, since there are no known studies on how Black master’s students decided to
pursue graduate school through the use photo-elicitation, this is a valuable tool to use for reflexive purposes.

University Context

The university site was selected due to accessibility, resources provided, and sample availability. The university is a predominately White institution (PWI) situated in the Southeast of the United States. In 1886, the university site began as an agricultural college and an all-White military school. The college was built due to the state’s need for education in agriculture, scholarship, and science. The founder of the college willed the majority of his property to produce an agricultural college intended for approximately 3,900 White male students (Suggs, n.d). To account for growth in academic and research pursuits, the university site rose from a college into a public, four-year, co-educational, research university which it remains today (Suggs, n.d).

The fall 2016 enrollment data, gathered from the university’s Office of Institutional Research, classified the research university as a predominantly white institution (PWI). The university has a total of 18,204 students, which is approximately 78% of the student population who self-identified as “White” or “Caucasian”. Students who self-identified as “Black” or “African American” represent only 7% of the total enrollment. Additionally, only 1% of the total graduate student enrollment are Black students. There are 270 Black students in graduate school out of 23,406 total students, which attend the university site. Of those 270 Black graduate students, 174 are master’s-degree students.
The Graduate School at the university site has several missions. One mission is to ensure the highest quality and diversity of graduate education in keeping with the land-grant mission of teaching, research, and public service. Since the beginning of this research study in 2015, significant changes in the graduate school administration have taken place to provide a more inclusive environment for students of color. Two administrators to focus on recruitment efforts of students of color and to provide them a supportive environment once they enrolled were hired. These needs primarily originated from input given by underrepresented graduate students at the study university. This context provided a way to study Black graduate students who often desire opportunities to diversify the climate of their respective institution’s graduate programs. Examining Black masters level students’ thoughts on what factors led them to apply for graduate school may offer insight on how Black students need to be recruited. Finally, the research site selected was chosen because it provided an ideal context for this study.

**Participant Recruitment**

To obtain participants for the current study, I utilized purposeful sampling. According to Patton (2002), purposeful sampling should include logic and power that lies in selecting information-rich cases that yield data needed to answer the research question. The approach of purposefully selecting this group of students for research aligned with sampling procedures related to constructivist grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A), I contacted the Office of Institutional Research to assist with purposefully selecting
students who: (1) self-identified as Black and/or African American, and (2) currently enrolled as a full-time master’s level student. After the constraints were established, the Office of Institutional Research conducted a systems query search by producing 75 students in 26 different majors who met the above criteria. I emailed the 75 students directly to recruit them for my research study. Furthermore, I emailed a selected group of faculty and staff at the university site to solicit nominations from students enrolled in their classes.

**Invitation to Participate in Study**

I developed a letter of invitation, reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Following IRB approval, and retrieving the systems query for the targeted population of students, I dispersed the letter of invitation via email to the 75 students who met the criterion (see Appendix B). The invitation to participate in my study included: (a) an introduction of the research study, (b) overall purpose of the study, (c) role of participants in the study, (d) instructions on the photo-elicitation method process, and (e) eligibility requirements. A nomination letter was sent to faculty and staff to nominate students to be in the study (see Appendix C). Eight students responded to my email for a response rate of 11%. Students that agreed to participate in the study received a second email that included: (a) a consent form (see Appendix D), (b) a study participant personal information form (see Appendix E), (c) a study participant ownership release form (see Appendix F), (d) a non-study participant release form (see Appendix G), and (e) a non-study participant release form for individuals under the age of 18 (see Appendix H). The non-study participant release forms were for participants to receive permission from other
individuals prior to taking photographs of those individuals. Once information to the study participants was dispersed, I assigned each a date, time, and location for the photo-elicitation interview. To have a photo-elicitation interview and to be a participant in the study, the students were required to meet the following:

1. Must self-identify as African American and/or Black;
2. Be currently enrolled as a full-time master’s student at the university site;
3. Have access to a smartphone and be able to take photographs with the smartphone to email to the researcher;
4. Meet one time in November 2016 to complete an one-on-one photo-elicitation interview session while having the two release forms completed and returned; and
5. Respond to a member checking email to provide accuracy of the information that they disclosed in the interview.

**Instruments for Data Generation**

Seven sources of data governed this study: (a) demographic information, (b) participant-generated photographs and hashtags of those photographs, (c) photo-elicitation interviews, (d) photo-map activity, (e) a field instrument to generate post-interview notes, (f) a personal journal, and (g) the researcher’s subjectivity statement. Data generation was the term selected over data collection because of the importance it has with the participants in this study. The term data generation indicates that the participants generated data by taking and writing hashtags days before I began the collection and analysis process for the elicited materials.
Demographic Information

Prior to each photo-elicitation interview, demographic information and characteristics from the eight participants were retrieved by email. Demographic information and characteristics included data gathered from the university site and from the participants. The obtained demographic information and characteristics of participants included the following:

- Major
- Undergraduate institution
- Classification
- Whether the participant was a student leader
- Whether the participant was a first-year or second-year master student
- Anticipated graduation date

The participant personal information form was used to document demographic information and student characteristics is included in Appendix E.

Participant-Generated Photographs and Hashtags

The participants in this study used their smartphones to take five photographs over five days. The five-day timeframe was given because I wanted to provide students the opportunity to reflect on what photos to capture. Rose (2012) stated that photo-elicitation is a reflective tool and therefore participants should have the time to reflect.

The number of photographs to take was given to provide an appropriate number of photographs for the participants to discuss. Participants were given minimum instructions on what to photograph to align with the photo-elicitation method’s procedures. To elicit a
variety of photographs, I wanted both physical representation and symbolic representation of how they gathered facts, information, and awareness about deciding to pursue graduate school.

Next, participants were instructed to caption their photographs by using one-word hashtag titles. According to Strum (2015), “Hashtags are extremely popular summation statements used on social media among young adults” (p. 68). Furthermore, Strum’s (2015) research study used hashtags, which allowed participants to describe their photographs in this matter. In the current research study, the hashtag (#) served as a way to engage participants.

After five days, participants gave photographs and hashtags to the researcher as artifacts of their thoughts about how they gathered facts, information, and awareness about deciding to pursue graduate school. Photographs were submitted to a Gmail address (BlackMasterStudents@gmail.com) strictly for the use of this study and for the confidentiality and protection of the participants’ photographs. Participants received little to minimum instructions in keeping with photo-elicitation method. Rose (2012) stated that few guidelines are instructed from researchers to participants when photo-elicitation is occurring in any given study.

Subsequent steps included preparation for the photo-elicitation interviews. In an effort to evoke memories and stimulate conversation, participants were instructed to discuss all five of their photographs. Additionally, participants were told to place their five photographs in a photo-map and explain how each photograph related to one another or built upon their knowledge about deciding to pursue graduate school. Similar to
concept maps, photo-maps “organize or represent the knowledge as a network consisting of nodes as concepts and links as the relations among concepts” (Tseng, Sue, Su, Weng, & Tsai, 2007, p. 693). Photo-maps allowed the researcher to understand the process (Tseng, Sue, Su, Weng, & Tsai, 2007) of how participants decided to pursue graduate school.

**Photo-Elicitation Interviews**

The term photo-elicitation interview is a qualitative research method used to describe the event whereby participants explain the meanings behind their photographs and captions to the researcher (Harper, 2002). To accomplish this, I used a semi-structured interview protocol and probing questions (see Appendix I) to provide participants with an opportunity to share their thoughts and see their world with interference at minimum. Participants were asked a list of questions about the photographs they took, how the photos related to how did they processed their knowledge about graduate school, and their thoughts using photographs to describe their critical moments. The interview questions addressed the study’s three research questions directly or indirectly.

Moreover, interviews were conducted in the Graduate Student Center at the university site. Out of 75 students who met the criteria of (1) self-identifying as African American and/or Black; and (2) current full-time master’s students attending the university site, eight attended the individual photo-elicitation interviews. The interviews took place in fall 2016. The time of length for interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. The time of length permitted students ample time for reflection and discussion.
Lastly, an audio recorder was used to record all interviews with the participant’s consent.

**Photo-map Activity**

An additional data source used in the study was the photo-map activity in which participants placed the five photographs in order of significance and described how they built upon one another in reference to pursuing graduate education. Photo-map was a term coined for this research study because of the use of photographs to describe a process. The use of the photo-map in this study is similar to concept maps that are utilized across the social sciences (Novak, 1981). A concept map is a “process that involves the identification of concepts in a body of study materials and the organization of those concepts into a hierarchical arrangement” (Novak, 1981, p. 3). The photo-map activity was the final section of the photo-elicitation interview.

**Field Instrument**

After each photo-elicitation interview, I utilized a structured field instrument to describe “analytic pattern” explanations among participants by writing out descriptions of what I observed (Nespo, 2006, p. 300). The field instrument was another form of triangulation to capture “the ideas, descriptions, data, and problems of the participants” (Nespo, 2006, p. 300). The field instrument allowed me to gather information on the participants’ body language, emotions, and significant moments within 30 minutes of each interview. This information served to contextualize analysis of the final transcription for coding purposes. Since I utilized grounded theory methodology with a photo-elicitation method that typically evokes emotions, the notes I gathered included participants’ emotions, verbal and non-verbal patterns, body language, responses, recall,
and voice influxes (Reese, 2014). The field instrument also served as a reflexive tool where I could address any subjectivity that would interfere with the study (see appendix J).

**The Researcher’s Journal**

The journal utilized during the research process served as an important tool in regards to my reflexive processes. Hayward (2000) stated that the researcher’s journal helps to serve as a form of triangulation, reflection, and organization. My journal included how I rationalized decisions, how I decided what to include and how I structured information in chapters. Furthermore, I used the journal to clarify concepts and their implications for my research (Hayward, 2000). Journaling allowed me to draw illustrations of concepts. I also kept a to-do-list on the procedures implemented in order to complete the study.

The journal served as a supplement to the field notes by acknowledging, expressing, and examining feelings of participants in the study (Reese, 2014). The journal allowed me to record immediately not only verbal communication but also non-verbal communication between the participant and myself when a computer was not readily available.

**Researcher as an Instrument**

For me, examining the ways Black students think about pursuing a master’s degree happened when I was in my master’s program in Higher Education and Student Affairs. After being one of four Black students in my graduate program, I decided to look deeper into reasons why there were not a plethora of Black students in graduate school in
general. I chose this line of research to study because it gradually became a personal
social responsibility and an obligation for my Black community.

Additionally, I desired to serve in a professional role that empowered students to
reach their purpose in life. As the former Vice President of the Black Graduate Student
Association (BGSA), this organization sought to complete the mission of increasing the
number of Black students in graduate school. The BGSA mission statement reads: "We
are dedicated to improving the status of African-American or Blacks in higher
education...by systematically identifying and addressing academic, professional,
University, and community needs and concerns" (About the Black Graduate Student
Association). As a collective group, we take on collaborative ventures to solve matters
that pertain to the Black community on campus. In fact, my purpose for this study aligned
with one of BGSA’s goals. The organization seeks to understand why African Americans
choose to attend graduate school in hopes of producing better recruiting mechanisms for
potential Black graduate students. BGSA implements this through a partnership with
other Black graduate students.

By seeking to conduct this research, I must acknowledge what collaboration
might look like in this context, given that I am a Black graduate student seeking
information from current Black graduate students pursuing their masters’ degrees. Three
of the participants in the study were BGSA members. This situation implies that I had a
personal connection with three of the eight participants. Moreover, because of this, I must
ensure that I am respectful towards ensuring that their voices are vital in the study.
Furthermore, I also know the passion that this group of Black graduate students has towards contributing to other Black students in graduate school. In fact, I conducted this research because I wanted it to be a greater cause and material that I can use in the near future in my next professional role. By learning marketing techniques and specific causes that make Black students seek graduate school, it will be helpful in my future endeavors.

Personally, I pursued graduate school because of a number of reasons. As a high school student, I was able to obtain the Gates Millennium Scholarship (GMS) that allowed my collegiate career to be free. The mission of GMS is to promote academic excellence and to provide an opportunity for outstanding minority students to reach their highest potential (Gates Millennium Foundation, n.d.). After I obtained this funding, I started envisioning myself with a doctorate degree. With the help of the scholarship, my financial burden was lifted from my parents and me to afford college for the next ten years if necessary. Although I did not have a financial burden, I needed motivation and inspiration to continue obtaining more education after my undergraduate years.

During my undergraduate years, I met my first Black female with a doctorate of philosophy, which happened to be my advisor. My inspiration to obtain more education at the master’s level came from my association with her. She encouraged me to continue pursuing more education by the ways she modeled herself to her students. As I matriculated to graduate school, I became aware of the disproportionate number of Black students versus White students. For the first time in my life, I felt a culture shock in my graduate program. Those feelings, along with participating more in church, birthed what I
call to be my purpose in life. My purpose is to increase the number of African American students in graduate school because I believe it will assist with the public good.

Therefore, since my desire is to increase the number of Black students in graduate school, I have to be sure to exercise several forms of reflexivity. Kolb (2012) argued that, “in being reflexive the researcher must incorporate continuous awareness of reflecting, examining and exploring his/her relationship through all stages of the research process” (p. 85). Reflexivity also means that I have to encourage the participants’ voices while minimizing my own (Kolb, 2012). To accomplish this, I began with an open-ended interview protocol with minimal interferences (Rose, 2012). In addition, to decreasing my voice, I developed a field instrument and utilized a personal reflection journal that identifies my assumptions and bias (Kolb, 2012). Finally, and more importantly, I conducted member checks. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described member checks as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314) in a study. It comprises transcriptions and the researcher’s interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they could check the credibility of the information (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Participants in the research study engaged in member checks where they were able to validate their transcriptions for accuracy purposes, descriptions of themes that emerged from using constructivist grounded theory, and how their photographs connect within those themes. The next section addresses the procedures in detail that enhanced the credibility of results.
Data Analysis Procedures

Following the data generation phase, I analyzed the information gathered from the interviews which included photographs, hashtags, and the field instrument based on constructivist grounded theory methodology. Data analysis in qualitative research makes sense for the text and image data (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, data analysis is the process of segmenting data then putting it back together.

Creswell (2014) argued that the first step in analyzing data involves transcribing interviews, optically scanning the material, typing up field notes, and sorting the data into different types depending on the sources of information. As a second step, Creswell (2014) recommended researchers find the impression of the overall depth, credibility, and use of collected information. One of the most critical parts of the data analysis process is the opportunity for researchers to reflect on the overall meaning of the data in the form of triangulation (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). Morse and Chung (2003) reported that triangulation is one qualitative method that provides a more balanced perspective in research. Ryan and Ogilvie, (2011) who also supported triangulating visual data, argued, “photo-elicitation provides one method of collecting data and therefore a good source of validation or triangulation that can add to the validity process” (p. 32). Therefore, making sense of the data from the photographs, sorting the data into different types, and data elicited from interviews all consist of procedures accounted for data analysis (Creswell, 2014; Ryan & Ogilvie, 2011; Morse & Chung; 2003).
To begin the data analysis procedure in this study, I applied Charmaz’s (2009) four coding levels. These levels are: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, (c) selective coding, and (d) theoretical coding.

**Coding Cycles**

Open coding, or initial coding, is the first level of data analysis where the procedures required that I break apart the data and remain open to theoretical possibilities (Charmaz, 2009). Corbin and Strauss (2008) defined open coding as the process of analyzing data to expose thoughts, ideas, and meanings contained in the text. Line-by-line and incident-to-incident coding analysis is critical in this level to break open the data (Charmaz, 2006). The goal for this level is to gain an impression of the data (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To accomplish this task, I coded the eight-interview transcripts line-by-line by using hard-copied sheets. Once the codes emerged, I imported them into Microsoft Word using the track changes feature. This feature is a way for Microsoft to keep track of the changes a person makes in a document. I used the track changes feature to code my eight transcripts, which resulted in over 1000 codes consisting of one to four word codes. Once the codes were identified, I printed out the sheets of codes and imported them manually into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Each of the eight participants had an assigned column where their codes were displayed.

Axial coding was the second level of data analysis. Corbin and Strauss (2008) defined axial coding as the process of relating categories to their sub-categories. In this level, I grouped similar ideas into sub-categories that came from initial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). According to Brown, Stevens, Troiano, and Schneider (2002) in the axial
coding level, four analytical process are occurring: “(a) continually relating subcategories to a category, (b) comparing categories with the collected data, (c) expanding the density of the categories by detailing their properties and dimensions, and (d) exploring variations in the phenomena” (p. 177). The goal for this level is to identify emerging concepts and to compare them with other emerging codes by using constant comparative methods (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, I color-coded like codes among the eight participants by using the shading/fill-cell function. This allowed movement from the opening coding cycling level to subcategories. At this level, over 50 sub-categories were found. Also at this level is when the two key themes emerged. One theme emerged because I constantly saw related phrases such as “critically thinking”, “intellectually engaged”, “mentally acrobatics”, “identifying research”, etc. The other key theme emerged because I constantly saw related phrases such as “family support”, “peer support”, “community support”, etc.

Selective coding was this the third level of data analysis where the procedures required that I extract and name a central theme to which all categories can be related (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined selective coding as the “process of integrating and refining the theory” (p. 143). Integration is critical at this level because it is the process that builds toward theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998). In this level of grounded theory, my goal was to reduce the number of sub-categories as much as possible. Saldaña (2013) posited that it is critical for participants’ voices to remain dominant. This level was the most challenging because I aimed for all of the participants’ codes to fit into the subthemes by maintaining representation of all voices. I
had to view the two major key themes and dissect them more. Stemmed from the two key themes emerged other sub-themes. The field notes and researcher’s journal was the most helpful at this stage. During this stage, I reviewed my notes to assure I was accurately identifying each subtheme. At this selective coding level, ten subthemes were found. The subthemes were found from a visual representation of all of the data during this stage. I used post it sticky notes to discover my subthemes. The goal after the selective coding level was to move towards the development and validation of a theory. The theory was validated through comparisons to raw data and serves as the final product (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; 1998).

**Theoretical coding**

The final cycle of coding utilized in the study was theoretical coding. Glaser (1978) recommended using theoretical coding for analyzing how categories and codes that are constructed from data might relate to one other. Theoretical coding is a process of data integration into a theory (Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, Wepner et. al. (2013) stated that it is a “process for discovering theoretically important ideas in respondents’ statements and for ordering and relating those statements in ways suggest by theory” (p. 17). Among the categories, the results of the theoretical codes were identified.

A critical point in theoretical coding, as discovered by Glaser (1998), is that a person’s way of thinking, and explanation of analysis, may seem clearer to someone with a similar cognitive style and cumbersome to another person with a different approach. However, because of my way of thinking, the aim of my study was to discover the theory, and that theory aided the understanding and actions I took. Theoretical coding is
the last step before forming a theory (Saldaña, 2013). Identifying common themes and patterns about how Black graduate students’ process knowledge about deciding to pursue graduate school. Five themes emerged from the ten subthemes after using post it sticky notes to create a visual representation. The five themes served as an umbrella for the ten subthemes. During this process, I found commonality among the ten subthemes and grouped them in pairs of two. The themes are described in Chapter 4.

Establishing Trustworthiness and Validity of Findings

Many scholars have addressed trustworthiness and validity concerns in research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Wolcott, 1990; Maxwell, 1992; Bradbury and Reason, 2001). To consider these concerns, I established preventative measures to establish trustworthiness of my data interpretations. First, I utilized personal subjectivity as a verification strategy to aim for fidelity. According to Peskin (2000), personal subjectivity mediates all phases of the qualitative research process. My field notes served as a means to address any of my personal subjectivities that may have appeared during the research process (Nespor, 2006).

I also demonstrated interpretive validity in the study. Maxwell (1992) and Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) stated that interpretive validity alludes to the degree in which a researcher’s interpretation of an account represents an understanding of the study group's perspective and the meanings attached to their words and actions. Since this research study used constructivist grounded theory as a framework, interpretive validity was useful for fidelity measures. Rather than assigning claims, I utilized Charmaz's (2009) four coding cycles of constructivist grounded theory in the study: (a) open coding,
(b) axial coding, (c) selective coding, and (d) theoretical coding. This assisted with thematically grouping the participants’ data. These thematic groupings were verified during member checking; a third technique that was used to add to the study's trustworthiness (Maxwell, 2002). Member checking is considered the most effective way of eliminating misinterpretations. Lastly, I enlisted the assistance of a critical friend to enhance the finding’s validity. The importance of having a critical friend is that they can “provide alternative perspectives, support, and protection from bias” in the researcher’s interpretation process (Foulger, 2010, p. 140).

**Member Validation**

Member checking, also known as member validation, involves systematically obtaining feedback to verify the accuracy of one’s data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions from the study group (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 2002). I conducted this step by first sending participants individual emails to verify the study’s findings. Next, participants confirmed and provided responses on three items: (a) participant's transcripts, (b) description of the themes, and (c) the placement of their photographs within the themes provided. Appendix K includes a copy of the email sent to the participants in regards to the member checking procedure. Participants checked the themes and corresponding meanings that emerged from the study and a log of the participant’s photographs that they obtained to partake in the member-check process.

**Critical Friend**

As another systematic step for establishing trustworthiness and validation, I enlisted the support of a doctoral student colleague as a critical friend. McNiff’s (2010)
definition of a critical friend “is someone whose opinion you value and who is able to critique your work and help you see it in a new light” (p. 21). Due to his relative expertise in photo-voice methodology and Black graduate students, my critical friend was chosen. Access to information that would have disclosed the participants’ identities was not given to the critical friend, though the critical friend read the codes that formed the themes and subthemes, and the friend asked important questions to how the data was arranged. The critical friend also suggested that I explore literature centered on the definitions of the themes and subthemes that emerged. For example, the critical friend suggested literature about social identity theory (Hogg, 2016), civic engagement (Jacoby, 2009), and social capital theory (Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the systematic steps in the study’s design, how data was generated, and the analysis process. Photo-elicitation was selected based on the linkage it held with constructivist grounded theory and the relevance of the study’s research question: How did Black master’s students process knowledge about graduate school when they decided to pursue graduate school? The chapter began with a rationale of the research design that was appropriate for the research questions. Next, I presented information regarding the university site that I selected for the study and descriptions of the participants. Additionally, I provided my subjectivity statement that disclosed potential biases and assumptions that might have affected my research process. Then, I described the systematic steps that demonstrated how I obtained participants and the instruments utilized to generate data. The data analysis procedures systematically
demonstrate how constructivist grounded theory was used in this study. Finally, to establish trustworthiness, I used member checking and a critical friend. The next chapter describes the findings from the study.
CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter includes findings from the data analysis process and contains five sections. The first section presents a brief overview of the study including the systematic methodological approach and information about the critical friend and member check procedures. The second section offers an introduction to study participants. The third section provides the findings from the study, arranged by overarching themes and subthemes. As relevant, participants’ photographs demonstrate the themes. The fourth section of the chapter answers the research questions. The fifth section offers the grounded theory model and explains how the model relates to the conceptual framework followed by a summary of Chapter Four, respectively.

Study Overview

This study examined how Black master’s students processed facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. The objective was to determine the processes Black master’s students followed when they decided to attend graduate school. To accomplish this objective, I examined the main factors that led Black students to pursue graduate school and the critical moments that influenced their ultimate decision to apply. Data from students provided the basis for constructing a theory. The overarching research question for this study was as follows: How do Black master’s students process knowledge about deciding to pursue graduate school? Secondary research questions included the following: What factors led Black master’s students to apply to graduate
school? What were the critical moments that influenced Black master’s students’ decisions to apply to graduate school?

The purpose of the study was achieved through a constructivist grounded theory methodology approach and an emergent, participant-generated method called photo-elicitation. The grounded theory methodology approach was used to construct theory from the data. The photo-elicitation method approach was used to generate the data. The method procedure engaged eight participants in documenting how they processed information, facts, and awareness about deciding to pursue graduate school by taking five photographs, writing captions in the form of hashtags, and participating in a 30-minute to one-hour photo-elicitation interview focused on the five photographs that each participant gathered. All eight interviews provided the participants an opportunity to reflect and process meaning of five photographs and their hashtags. The third source of data was the field note instrument that I utilized to produce post-interview notes (See appendix J). The notes also included a description about my subjectivity as a researcher.

Data analysis involved Charmaz (2009) four cycles of coding: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, (c) selective coding, and (d) theoretical coding. Open coding is the first level of data analysis where the procedures require that a researcher break apart the data and remain open to theoretical possibilities (Charmaz, 2009). Open coding of each transcript resulted in over 1,000 codes. During the final coding cycle—theoretical—I was attentive to see if categories emerged from the existing conceptual framework (See Figure 1.1). Five themes emerged, and developed the foundation for a constructivist
grounded theory of how Black master’s students processed knowledge about how they decided to pursue graduate school.

The data analysis process also included seeking the assistance of a critical friend to validate the accuracy of my findings, and involving study participants in member checking. These procedures took place after I constructed themes, subthemes, and finalized the placement for each photograph in regards to the themes and subthemes. A critical friend whose research involves photo-voice methodology and Black graduate students. As a result, my critical friend reviewed the codes, definitions of five themes, and ten subthemes. The feedback received from the critical friend was positive. The themes and subthemes remained the same because the critical friend’s comments indicated that the themes were captured holistically, and the subthemes depicted a good representation of categorizing the material. Additionally, the noticeable pattern was that the subthemes illustrated a variation of abstract and concrete concepts. The only concern the critical friend had was in regards to the Funding subtheme. This subtheme was viewed by the critical friend as an outlier, and did not fit into the framework as the other nine themes. Yet, the critical friend concluded that the subtheme Funding was necessary and recommended that the themes and subthemes should remain the same.

The member checking procedure transpired after my critical friend’s assistance. To appropriately conduct member checking, I sent the eight participants an email (see Appendix K) to review the following attachments: (a) transcription of their verbiage (b) the photographs and the hashtag titles matrix placed within their overarching themes and subthemes, and (c) the flow of events for their photomap activity to verify the accuracy of
translation. The participants’ feedback concerning the overall themes established a sense of validity of the categories and themes that I produced for the study. To supply a visual aid, the photograph matrix of the themes were sent to the participants. During this member checking procedure, participants were also reminded of their rights, per IRB standards and procedures. Participants were told they may remove any of the photographs from the research study, which also is addressed in the Consent Form (See Appendix D). Additionally, I reassured the participants that their photographs did not violate any ethnical issues as addressed in Chapter 3 because of the photographic content.

In response to the member check document sent via email, all eight participants provided written feedback confirming the material. The participants confirmed the transcriptions, themes of the photographs, and the hashtag title matrix. The matrix included the descriptions of all 40 photographs, the overarching themes and subthemes, and the photomap activity in regards to the flow of events. Participants confirmed all of the material and many expressed their gratitude to participate in the study.

**Introduction to Study Participants**

As indicated in Table 4.1, the eight participants in the study varied according to the study participant personal information form (see Appendix E). The array of majors were intentional for the study to reduce a skewed perspective of participants from a single major or groups of majors. The study also sought both student leaders and non-student leaders. Participants’ undergraduate institution also provided additional context for the study to consider. The students that graduated from a predominately White institution (PWI) versus those who did not may have affected into how students gathered facts,
information, and knowledge about graduate school. The other type of institutions included liberal arts college and a historical black colleges and universities (HBCU). Liberal arts colleges are defined as “curriculum based, primarily in arts and science fields; small classes and close student-faculty relationships; full-time study and study residence on campus; and little emphasis on vocational preparation,” (Baker, Baldwin, & Makker, 2002, p. 48). HBCUs are defined “under the Higher Education Act of 1965 as institutions of higher education established before 1964 whose principal mission was then, and remains today, the education of Black citizens,” (Sato & Hodge, 2012, p. 378).

The final segment of the categorizing information—classification—provided an understanding of participants’ reflection process at various stages in their master’s programs. The 1st year students may have had a clearer understanding of how they decided to pursue graduate school more than the 2nd year students due to recently going through the process. To acquire confidentiality, participants selected their own alias.

Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Characteristics of Participants</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Attended College on Campus</th>
<th>Student Leader</th>
<th>Undergraduate</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hermes</td>
<td>Engineering, Computing, and Applied Sciences</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>PWI</td>
<td>2nd Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>Architecture, Arts, and Humanities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>2nd Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noelle</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>PWI</td>
<td>1st Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>PWI</td>
<td>2nd Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>HBCU</td>
<td>1st Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>PWI</td>
<td>2nd Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>Architecture, Arts, and Humanities</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Liberal Arts</td>
<td>2nd Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>Engineering, Computing, and Applied Sciences</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>PWI</td>
<td>1st Year</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All of the Black master’s students were enrolled as full-time masters students during the research study. Four of the participants were females and four were males. All participants had different majors associated with four Colleges on campus. Two students had majors within the College of Engineering, Computing, and Applied Sciences (i.e., biosystems engineering and bioengineering). Two students had majors within the College of Architecture, Arts, and Humanities (i.e., communication and city planning). An additional two students had majors within the College of Business (i.e., accounting and marketing). Lastly, two students had majors within the College of Education (i.e., clinical mental health and counselor education). Beyond these broad demographics, the participating master students provided personal background details about themselves and of their educational journeys. These details were gathered in the photo-elicitation interview protocol (See Appendix I). Presented below are the detailed narratives of the eight participants.

**Hermes.** During this study, Hermes was a full-time student in the biosystems engineering program. Originally, he came to graduate school to study Mechanical engineering as a non-degree seeking student. As time progressed, Hermes ended up being accepted into the biosystems program instead of mechanical engineering. As an undergraduate student, he was very close to the Ronald McNair program director at his institution. The Ronald McNair program is designed to prepare traditionally underrepresented undergraduate students for graduate studies through involvement in research and other scholarly activities (Scholars, n.d.). The Ronald McNair program director would encourage Hermes to read literature about graduate school. The director
would also encourage Hermes to learn about how to enroll in graduate school. “My McNair director made me open up some books looking at new list and new things, so I could get myself into a graduate school,” he explained. Despite needing the guidance to pursue graduate school at the undergraduate level, Hermes recognized at the age of 13 that obtaining a graduate degree was a goal he wanted to achieve. Although he is currently earning a master’s degree, Hermes’s next steps are to apply to a Ph.D. program. “I just always wanted to call myself a doctor,” he proclaimed. Hermes is looking to complete his master’s degree in May 2017. He is also seeking to obtain his Ph.D. in biosystems at the same institution.

Charity. Charity participated in this study while she was a full-time student in the communications program. Unlike Hermes, Charity received her undergraduate degree from a historically Black college and university (HBCU), which offered a different perspective and background for the study. As an undergraduate student, Charity first started to think about pursuing graduate school while being a second semester junior. “I took a comm law class and it was very interesting, so I started thinking about law school. My mom is a lawyer and my aunt is a lawyer. So I grew up around law,” Charity explained. Despite her strong interest in wanting to pursue law school, she took a different route for her studies. After contemplating about why she wanted to pursue law school, Charity stated since her background was in advertising that it made more sense to pursue Communications. “My professor (for communications law) just got me to thinking, I can do this,” Charity explained. Her communications law professor is one of her reasons for being in graduate school.
**Anthony.** Similar to Charity’s story, Anthony started thinking about advancing his education to pursue law school. “I wanted to be a lawyer because I liked words and articulating arguments, so people told me I would be really good at it,” Anthony explained. Nevertheless, as he became highly involved in undergrad as a residence hall assistant, and other leadership positions within student affairs, it led him to want to pursue a graduate degree in Student Affairs. Anthony was additionally a member of an organization geared towards underrepresented students interested in Student Affairs called NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP). He was a member while being an undergraduate student. The NUFP program is for mentoring undergraduate students wishing to explore and better understand the field of student affairs and/or higher education, and it sparked Anthony’s interest to pursue graduate school in this field.

Anthony also shared that he did not come up with the idea to come to graduate school on his own. As a member in NUFP, he attended a NASPA conference luncheon, where the topic was center on the career field of student affairs. Confused at the luncheon about the given topic, his advisor clarified to Anthony what Student Affairs entailed. Anthony stated to his advisor, “Then it all started making sense because I did not know what you all did.” Anthony then proceeded and said, “It all blossomed from there and I had to learn the next steps in order to get into graduate school.”

**Noelle.** Unlike the previous participants, Noelle was pursuing a dual degree while at the University site, known as the combined bachelor’s/master’s track. The combined bachelor’s/master’s track programs provide students with the opportunity to receive their bachelor and master degrees within five years. Noelle received her undergraduate degree
at the institution of this study and is currently working towards her master’s degree. Her originally plan was to complete a degree from an institution in the Midwest. This plan did not work out due to high cost, therefore, Noelle transferred to the institution of this study. “It was a high tuition and I knew I wanted to go to grad school, so I went back and stayed where I knew my GI Bill would cover,” Noelle explained.

Noelle also shared that she would be 22 years old when obtaining her master’s degree. Her work ethic as a high school international baccalaureate student accounted for her success. She explained that graduate school was not considered until her senior year of high school. Hence, the reason why the five-year track was appealing to her. During her undergraduate experience, Noelle served as a Resident Assistant, a cabinet member in Student Government Association, and a member of a sorority.

**Danielle.** Similar to Charity’s background, Danielle attended a HBCU for her undergraduate collegiate career. To pay for college, Danielle joined the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC). The ROTC are a group of college-based officer training programs for training officers of the United States Armed Forces (Ways to Attend, n.d.). Another similar mindset was that Danielle wanted to pursue law school like Anthony and Charity; however, she took a different trajectory like the other participants who had the same intentions.

After graduating from undergraduate, Danielle’s first job was being an English teacher in China. When arriving back to the States in 2013, Danielle had a challenge finding a consistent job. She was straightforward stating, “I pretty much job-hopped from job to job. The job that I really liked while job hopping was at a marketing firm.”
Although Danielle enjoyed the job at the marketing firm, she was not sold on the idea that it was 100% commission based, yet this job position encouraged Danielle to pursue a master’s degree in Marketing.

**Joe.** Joe participated in this study while he was a full-time student in the city and regional planning program. Unlike many of the participants, Joe’s focus was on giving back and serving people. This fact explained how he made the decision to pursue a degree in city and regional planning, which is geared towards serving the community. “I always wanted to make a difference and to help folks out,” Joe commented.

Joe’s ‘aha moment’ about pursuing a graduate degree came after he returned from an abroad trip. “I had decided after I studied abroad my sophomore year that was a turning in my life I went to Costa Rica I was there for four full months and when I came back I was yearning to learn more…during that process and I knew at that time I wanted something more,” Joe explained. The benefits of studying abroad transformed into a desire for Joe to seek out graduate school afterwards.

**Jessica.** During the study, Jessica was a full-time student in the clinical mental health counseling program. Like Noelle, Jessica attended the institution where this study was conducted for her undergraduate years. Jessica knew from the time she was a junior in undergrad that she wanted to attend graduate school at the masters level. “I decided to go to grad school partially because I knew I had to because I wanted to get a well-paying job,” she explained. “I think I decided probably about my junior year that was I going to have to go ahead and get a master’s, but I didn’t decide on a Ph.D. until like two months ago.” Jessica furthered elaborated, “I guess just kind of like a shock like ‘okay you’re
going into the real world what’s your plan you know,’ And I started to like my psychology class I was getting more into my core psychology work and I had women psychology and it was really interesting, but psychology at university is really broad. I knew I wanted to focus more and I had mentors who had told me about the university’s counseling program and I was like okay let’s try counseling, so that was like what kind of led me.” For Jessica, a fear of not having job security and her interest in the field assisted in her decision making process to pursue graduate school.

**Justin.** Justin participated in this study while he was a full-time student in the bioengineering program. Same as Noelle, Justin was in the combined bachelor’s/master’s program track at the institution of this study. Although every participant in the study exemplified a pure passion for research, Justin was the most expressive about his work. He had a true desire to learn. Justin articulated his research more thoroughly than the other participants, which illustrated his interest for learning more. To explain his research, Justin said “Basically my research is dealing with computer modeling of the human spine and we’re just doing different stimulations of different spinal deformities—one in particular called kyphosis.” He goes on to say, “So if you know the hunchback in Notre Dame he has thoracic kyphosis and basically were looking at different ways to help patients by adding external implants or braces to the spine so that just in a nutshell of what I do and what got me inspired to do the whole graduate route.” His verbal and non-verbal communication during the interview indicated that he had a high level of interest for his research. Justin spent a considerable amount of time in the interview to explain his work.
Justin also shared that his interest in applying in the fast track master’s program was influenced by other Black graduate students—especially the students in the Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA) at the institution. “The whole BGSA group adopted me when I was sophomore,” Justin acknowledged by smiling. Therefore, he decided to take the necessary step in enrolling in the fast track five-year program during his second-year in school.

**Presentation of Findings**

The utilization of photographs in the research study served as the primary method. The line-by-line coding of each of the eight transcripts resulted in over 1,000 initial codes. Over twenty conceptual themes emerged in the second coding process. Ten subthemes emerged in the third cycle of coding. Overall, five theoretical themes developed and formed the underpinning for a grounded theory of how Black masters students process knowledge of graduate school. The five theoretical themes were (a) Mental Stimulations, (b) Experiential Experiences, (c) Community Support, (d) Life Strategies, and (d) Identity Influences, otherwise termed by the researcher as the Big Five Factors.

Mental Stimulations, the first theme, described how the participants became mentally engaged and motivated by learning new knowledge. These discoveries were about identifying research problems or making discoveries about themselves. From the theme Mental Stimulations, two subthemes surfaced: (a) Discourses and (b) Materials. The subtheme Discourse described how dialogue inside the classroom engaged the participants to be curious about graduate school. The subtheme Materials examined
through various literature how participants identified research gaps inadvertently, and made self-discoversies about themselves. The subtheme Materials also encompassed stories passed down to the participants before deciding to pursue graduate school.

Experiential Experiences, the second theme, described how the participants learn through experience via grasping and converting new information. These experiences consisted of learning information about graduate school through concrete experiences or vicarious experiences. The concrete experiences took place in close proximities of people and the vicarious experiences took place in distant proximities of people. Experiential Experiences is supported by two subthemes: (a) Close-up and (b) Distant. Close-up experiences described the first-hand learning experiences that the students had to learn about graduate school through organizations and associations. Distant experiences described how participants learned more about the ins and outs of graduate school through a mentor or family member by watching them go through graduate school. These participants had the opportunity to learn from other individuals as they watched their process of going through graduate school.

Community Support, the third theme, described the support the participants gathered from mentors, peers, or family that encouraged or inspired them to look into graduate school directly or indirectly. Community support has two subthemes: (a) Informal and (b) Formal. The first subtheme, Informal, explored the types of support systems that positioned the participants to pursue graduate school. These support systems included family, friends, and mentors. The second subtheme, Formal, included organizations and associations as support mechanisms that encouraged the participants to
consider graduate school. These forms of Formal Support consisted of programs that are geared towards assisting underrepresented students into graduate school. Unlike Informal Support, Formal Support provided the participants to be around other graduate students when they were undergraduate students. Therefore, Formal, exposed the participants to more of graduate school life versus Informal.

Life Strategies, the fourth theme, described how participants went about questioning and figuring out strategies to graduate school. The participants questioned if an undergraduate degree would suffice for the lifestyle they wanted to live or if they needed to pursue more education. Two subthemes emerged from Life Strategies: (a) Navigation and (b) Funding. The first subtheme, Navigation, explored how participants used their resources to understand graduate school. Within this subtheme, all of the participants had a conscious interest of graduate school and explored what it was about through networking and the Internet. The second theme, Funding, included financial reasons why the participants decided to pursue graduate school.

Identity Influences, the fifth theme, explored the participants’ perceptions of their identities. The participants took on the mindset that pursuing graduate school “should be” an objective. Two subthemes emerged from Identity Influences: (a) Purpose and (b) Legitimacy. The subtheme, Purpose, described how the participants believed that their sense of being are to enhance the lives of others around them. The participants within this theme underwent a self-discovery process of why they exist, which concluded them to being servant-oriented individuals. By having a servant-orientated mentality, led the participants to pursue graduate school. These participants had the mindset that life was
bigger than themselves. The second subtheme, Legitimacy, described how participants felt that they should make themselves proud by pursuing graduate school. Unlike Purpose, which had expectations and obligations from other outside people, Legitimacy described how the participants had an obligation to be a high achiever to themselves.

Narratives and photographs connected to each theme are discussed below, followed by a summary of the participants’ collective process.

**Mental Stimulations**

The first theme emerged from the voices of Charity, Danielle, and Jessica; which their collective voice produced the theme Mental Stimulations. Mental Stimulations described how the participants were mentally challenged and engaged, which sparked their inquisitiveness about learning past the undergraduate level. Mental Stimulations is supported by two subthemes: (a) Discourse and (b) Materials.

**Discourse.** The subtheme, Discourse described how one participant thrived from being mentally challenged through dialogue. This in turn, sparked the participant’s curiosity to learn more about graduate school.

**Charity.** Charity, a full-time student in the communications program captured a photoshopped photograph of Abraham Lincoln with an afro, and titled it, #ABELincolnvsAfro (Figure 4.1). The photograph portrays the exact image that caused mental confusion to Charity for one of her undergraduate classes.
While in a communication law course, Charity’s professor introduced the concept of copyright laws by presenting an image of Abraham Lincoln with an afro. During the interview, it was apparent that this image itself created a disequilibrium effect for Charity. The confusion took place when Charity’s professor asked, “Who owns this image?” The question was addressed to the class due to copyright laws. While laughing, Charity stated, “So we spent about an hour fighting over Abraham Lincoln with an afro because the original photograph is public domain.”

What was interesting about this abstract photograph is that it created an intellectual debate. For the first time, Charity enjoyed the intense conversations and how their professor was interrogating her classmates over an image based on copyright laws. “And that's when I started thinking, I'm in to this, I kind of like this,” Charity stated with so much enthusiasm. “I like this sort of circular way of thinking. Thinking outside of the box, trying to see the connections between things.” While being in the class and in the middle of the debate, Charity started to think about what her mom said about law school. “And I remember my mom had told me about law school. They just ask you a lot of questions and make sure that they try to turn everything you think you know upside down
and I was like okay, this is happening now, it's happening real time. I got this,” Charity said with excitement.

Stimulated conversations that challenged Charity’s way of thinking compelled her into questioning the entire notion about graduate school. “The circular way of thinking” intrigued her in such a way that she knew pursuing a law degree was the right fit for her. Although Charity did not pursue a law degree, her mind started ticking to figure out what would be next for her after graduation. Charity articulated that her communications law course sparked a mental hunger to learn more. Then she realized that increasing her education to the graduate school level would be more enjoyable than expected.

Charity also had another encounter that provided her with mental stimulation that sparked her interest about graduate school. She captioned the photograph titling it #QualitativeMethods (Figure 4.2).

"It reminds me of the whole process of our professor. And our class was very discussion-based. He would always kind of fight us. He'd make us really work to
justify, why and to really explain why we felt this way about a thing,” Charity explained in an excited manner by relating her previous communications law course with her current qualitative methods course. She elaborated with the story to say, “And we came up with this meme, it was like you know, ginger-rye thinks your answer is wrong. Because he would sometimes just tell us, like no I don't accept that. And we would be like no you have to accept it. I would never forget the first discussion we had in that class was about Rachel Dolezal. And what it means to be black. And I still go to his office and I'll be like let me tell you else why you're wrong.”

Charity essentially captured the photograph of the textbook that she is currently using to explain how her current professor reminded her of a former communications law professor. “I just wanted to debate with him because I knew. I was like because blackness is a construct, but that means we made it and it's real. And whiteness is an exclusionary subject and its reductionism and no one can be excluded.” After explaining her stance, Charity explained the connection for the two photographs, the Abraham Lincoln image and the qualitative methods book. “It kind of relates to my other...the other image I had in mind. We always had a discussion. It was always something. There was never not a debate in class, there was never not that exchange and it reminded me of the first, of the first picture that came into my head. Where we were having this fight about Lincoln wearing the afro. And it kind of reminded...it was about cyclical and circular in the way that it happened,” she stated. Ultimately, Charity wanted to be positioned in a space where she could influence other individuals to think outside of the box. Additionally, she wanted other individuals to engage in critical thinking when it came to education. This is
what inspired Charity to seek more education after the undergraduate level—the urge for new knowledge and ways to disperse this knowledge with other individuals.

Materials. The subtheme, Materials explored how books and other literature made participants decide to pursue graduate school and how participants were mentally stimulated through books and other literature.

Charity. The photograph of Abraham Lincoln that stirred up an intellectual debate was not the only mental information to inspire Charity to think about advancing her education, but also an image of her grandfather’s thesis (Figure 4.3). “This little ancient-looking red book” as Charity describes it, really inspired her to begin asking questions at a young age such as “what is a thesis?” This question opened up a new conversation for Charity and her grandparents. She could recall vividly the conversations centered on history of African Americans in Greenville, which was the focus of her grandfather’s thesis. It later on registered that her grandfather obtained his master’s degree in education.

![Figure 4.3 #GrandfathersThesis](image)

This material, her grandfather’s thesis, stimulated Charity mentally by reading the book. However, the “little ancient looking red book” generated conversations among her
family members about what it took her grandfather to receive a master’s degree. Her grandfather made sacrifices to earn a master’s degree. Charity’s grandmother also earned her master’s degree as was required to make sacrifices. Charity explained, “My grandmother wrote a paper about early childhood psychology and she used my aunt as her main case study. She just wrote about her whole first year of life.” It was insightful to see how Charity was exposed to research through both of her grandparents’ studies.

On one hand, Charity learned about various methods to a research study through her grandparents’ research, and conversely, she learned how research could be so inspiring and how it went against her assumptions of what it entailed. Charity elaborated, “I read my aunt's paper, the paper my grandmother wrote about my aunt. And my mom was like ‘oh yeah that is from her masters she was working towards her masters at that point. She wrote this for class,’ and I just felt, it just seemed really touching. That she would take so much time to really like remember the notes and like remember all of these little episodes from her, from her experiences and be able to translate them to something she could submit for school. I was like your experiences count as education!” Learning about how research can be so enjoyable helped set the foundation to Charity’s discovery about graduate school.

Although Charity captured a photograph that symbolically represented her grandfather’s thesis, additionally her grandmother’s thesis helped Charity to learn more about graduate school as well. Growing up around her grandparents exposed Charity to an intellectual world that she would not have received anywhere else.
Jessica. Jessica, a full-time student in the clinical counseling program, captured a book that she read called *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Figure 4.4) as a mental note that encouraged her in the decision-making process in regards to education. “I’ve read from this book about inequalities about education. There was one thing that had stuck out to me ever since. I read how as a minority a white male still would make more than me,” Jessica explained in a disheartening way.

![Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life](image)

*Figure 4.4 #WithoutStruggleTheresNoProgress*

Although she believed this concept, it motivated her to not be a victim, but to recognize that there is work to be done to change this mentality that black women can make more than white males. She realized this had to be proven. Therefore, this was one of Jessica’s deciding factors to pursue a master’s degree.

Danielle. Complementary to Jessica, Danielle a full-time student in the marketing program, captured a book called *Yeah. You are a Badass* (Figure 4.5) to help her to realize her inner greatness. Similar to Jessica, Danielle’s reading inspired and made her
question the core beliefs that she had about everything. This book was a mind switch for
her. Books similar to the one that Danielle has read helped her through the process of
pursuing more school. When she was miserable working the jobs that were not fulfilling,
she would escape and getaway inside of book.

Figure 4.5 #YeahYouAreABadAss

Danielle’s other form of conditioning her mind to thinking positive thoughts is to
read the Bible. This book was a very critical resource prior to graduate school. “I stay on
top of my spirituality,” Danielle disclaimed in a cheerful manner. She expounded upon
the notion that the Bible was her go to source.

Another inspiring book that Danielle read is called Thinker Toys. It was a book
that helped Danielle process how her mind works. To encapsulate the read, it detailed
ingenious creative techniques for corporate individuals to address problems in
unconventional ways. This read was very essentially to Danielle’s mental toolbox
because it helped her to discover characteristics about herself, and then aligned her with
the marketing degree she is pursuing. Additionally, what the piece of literature did for her was to create motivation and reiterate the “myth of the angry black woman” in a positive perspective. “I took it as motivation, but it pretty much stated how African American women are leading right under white males when it comes to being CEOs,” she explained with such delight.

To sum it up for Danielle, she trusted that by reading her collections of literature, such as: Yeah. You are a Badass, Thinker Toys, and the Bible created a mind shift for her in believing in herself. “Reading those books, reading the Bible, it was my motivation to apply and say, ‘I can’t quit. The worse thing I can do is quit on myself’, ” Danielle stated. She expounded on this notion and said, “That’s how the motivational books sparked me to even look for graduate schools to apply to.”

**Summary of Mental Stimulation**

Mental Stimulation examined the discourses and materials that participants encountered to the reasons why they decided to pursue a master’s degree. The patterns of responses among the three participants supported the theme of mental stimulations. They cited incidents that made them think critically in regards to their dispositions. These incidents equated to the participants interrogating themselves because of a mental disequilibrium effect. When experiences or information they came across did not fit into their current knowledge box, this is where the disequilibrium started to begin. Through these mental experiences and new information, these factors caused the participants to gravitate towards wanting to expand their mindset and to understand the knowledge they were learning more.
Within the Discourse subtheme, Charity’s description of her photograph captured moments of uncertainty and how it caused her to grow intellectually in her ways of thinking. The effect retrieved from this experience caused her to desire more challenges. Phrases such as “mental acrobatics” and “circular way of thinking” confirmed that Charity was in stage in life where her mental capacity was growing and was starting to think like a master’s student. Within the Materials subtheme, Jessica utilized verbiage questioning the systemic issues such as “inequalities in education” and “changing the mentality that black women and make more than white males.” While Jessica’s literature was on a macro level scale, Danielle delved in the readings that were on a micro level scale, which included learning more about herself. Danielle’s sole purpose for her readings was to build her self-efficacy in order to make better life decisions, which resulted in her pursuing a master’s degree.

Collectively, Charity, Jessica and Danielle articulated thoughts about their readiness to enter their respective master’s programs after metabolizing the new information that was learned from their incidents. Nevertheless, Charity cited incidents that took place in class dialogue where she became intrigued about learning more. In contrast, rather than learning in a classroom environment to help make decisions about pursuing an advanced degree, Jessica and Danielle focused on literature to address problems or to produce motivation to apply for graduate school.

**Experiential Experiences**

The second theme emerged from the collective voice of the participants Noelle, Justin, and Charity the majority of the participants was Experiential Experiences.
Experiential Experiences described the knowledge, information, and awareness gained from participants viewing other graduate students as they pursued a graduate degree before enrolling, or learning through hands-on experiences that persuade them to take an interest in graduate school. Experiential Experiences is supported by two subthemes: (a) Close-up and (b) Distant.

**Close-up.** Close-up is the first subtheme within Experiential Experiences. Participants described the first-hand learning experiences that they had to learn more about graduate school through internships.

**Noelle.** Noelle, a full-time student in the accounting program, captured a photograph illustrating a close-up experience and she captioned it, #EliteExperience (Figure 4.6). The photograph consisted of the internship offer letter that Noelle received.

![Figure 4.6 #EliteExperience](image)

To Noelle, this letter defined a significant moment in her life where she had to decide whether pursuing a master’s would be feasible. By receiving a job offer letter at
the age of 19, Noelle had to make hard choices. However, her internship that she experienced helped her to make a choice whether graduate school was for her or not.

Noelle stated, “This was letter basically considering an internship offer well my second and that was really a defining moment like most students when we have career fairs. They do not even want to go talk to these company’s because they like they are afraid, and so I went to the interview and getting offers like okay. ‘This company accepts you and you can perform at this level and what does that mean for your career,’ so after this internship the offered me a second one which was more specialized in what I wanted to do, and they offered me full time. So I’m actually working with this company now, but that was really among the words like ‘ok now this is your field what do you need to excel in this field.’”

By Noelle asking herself the question, “What do you need to excel in this field,” inspired her even more to pursue the combined bachelor’s/master’s track. Noelle was aware after her internship that pursuing a master’s degree was not necessary, nevertheless, she wanted to excel in the accounting field. Selecting the combined bachelor’s/master’s route was the best way that Noelle thought that she could succeed.

Justin. Justin, a full-time student in the bioengineering program, captured a photograph illustrating close-up experiences and he captioned it, #TheLab (Figure 4.7).
Justin’s first-hand learning experience that made him think about graduate school consisted of being in a lab a full summer. Justin explained, “This was my sophomore year and I was working with some other grad students and another undergrad student in this electronics lab. It was bioelectronics lab, so I really got to be exposed to different technology like how it might be used in the industry and it was just kind of like a big play day, because we were inventing and building stuff all day long. It was kind of like a big hobby shop, and it kind of made me want to go to grad school.” Justin further explained how the experience was beneficial to him, “I was able to take to grad students all summer and they were both Ph.D. students. One was more focus on imaging like medical imaging, and one was more focus on supercomputing track back medical data and stored medical information. This was just a lab I worked in in the summer. I just kind of asked them what’s grad school like and they said it what’s your doing right now building and experimenting.”
By having an experiential experience, Justin was exposed to graduate school life. During his experience in the lab, Justin received the opportunity to not only work hands on with the technology devices that graduate students use, but also be able to work with current graduate students. He even received the opportunity to ask questions about graduate school from two individuals that were in a major that Justin had an interest in pursuing. From the entire experience, Justin gathered more of a focus into what he wanted to do.

**Distant.** Distant is the second subtheme within Experiential Learning. Participants learned more about the ins and outs of graduate school through a mentor or family member by viewing them distantly pursue a graduate degree. These participants had the opportunity to see other individuals go through the process of graduate school and to see them graduate.

**Noelle.** Noelle captured a photograph illustrating distance observation and she captioned it, #SissysMasters (Figure 4.8).
The photograph illustrated Noelle sister’s degree certificate. At the tender age of 12 years old, Noelle had the opportunity of observing her sister go through graduate school and realizing the various degrees offered. Noelle commented, “So it was really like the distinguishing moment like why did I think there was something other than doctors and lawyers such as med school and law school. I did not even think of a master’s in public administration.” Noelle sounded perplexed as she went on. “Many people did not know that unless there in that field and so it was actually because she went to like it,” Noelle proclaimed.

The significance of Noelle watching her sister pursue a graduate degree revealed to Noelle the graduate degree options. Up until the age of 12, Noelle was only exposed to doctors of medicine and attorneys. By seeing that they were a plethora of master degrees to select from assisted Noelle in learning more about graduate school. Furthermore, by watching her sister undergo the process of attaining a master’s degree made Noelle more knowledgeable about the graduate school process.

**Charity.** Complementary to Noelle, Charity watched one of her professors go through the process of obtaining her Ph.D. This photograph symbolically represents the day that Charity graduated and the professor that she saw go through the process of graduate school being there with her. The photograph was titled, #TheProfessor (Figure 4.9).
During this process as an undergraduate student, Charity learned more about the details of a dissertation and the level of endurance a student must have to complete such a degree. Charity confirms why this photograph is significant by stating, “I remember...because she was the person I saw to do this thing. And she had seen me through the entire journey by being finally done.” She goes on to say, “I remember it means a lot to me in that sense. I remember being super hopeful and excited. I was like I'm one step closer to being like one of my heroes.” Although Charity did not observe her professor obtaining a master’s degree, it is still applicable because it is graduate education.

After Charity’s graduation, her professor held her to a high standard stating, “You're one of the people I'll be calling to like come in and talk to the students. I was like oh no, I'm not. I'm not. She was like no but you are actually like, you are going to create
research, generate knowledge, and further the field. You're in this now, and I am going to be looking for you to be in this. And I was just like oh no don't do this to me.” The reason why this moment was significant to Charity was that she knew what her professor had to endure in graduate school. Charity was now accountable to pursue more education because she watched, learned, and now it was time for her to execute. “She held me to a standard and so that's why that's meaningful to me and why I think that's an important part of how I got into grad school,” Charity explained as she spoke about her experience with her professor.

**Summary of Experiential Experiences**

Experiential Experiences examined the knowledge and skills the participants learned about graduate school education through close-up and distant experiences. The patterns of responses among the three participants supported the theme of Experiential Experiences. They cited specific moments that made them think about graduate school by being involved in an internship or observing another individual pursue a graduate degree. Through their experiential experiences, the participants gathered new knowledge in regards to graduate school.

Within the Close-up subtheme, Noelle’s hands on internship assisted her in the pursuit of graduate school. Noelle questioned the fact if she needed more education after her internship was completed. By going through the process of working and being around people she aspired to be more like, encouraged her to think more about graduate school. In contrast, Justin’s work in the lab also made him start to think more about graduate school. Justin’s involvement in the lab displayed why experiential experiences
contributed to his wealth of knowledge about graduate education. Not only was Justin introduced to the work of graduate students, but he also had the opportunity to work with Ph.D. students.

Within the Distant subtheme, Noelle watched her sister pursue a master’s degree. She viewed her sister’s rigorous coursework, she heard her sister speak about the requirements of getting into a master’s program, and she watched her sister prepare for presentations and tests. Specific phrases such as “why did I think there was something other than doctors and lawyers” displayed how Noelle learned about new master’s degrees from observing her sister. Similar to Noelle, Charity witnessed one of her favorite professors going through the process of receiving a Ph.D. Phrases such as “she was the person I saw to do this thing” demonstrated how Charity learned more about the graduate school process. Furthermore, Noelle’s usage of specific words such as “I remember it being the hardest things I had to see my sister have to do” illustrates why this photograph fits under distance observation. Furthermore, Charity’s usage of verbiage such as “She was the person who one of the people I saw, do this thing,” referring to her professor earning her Ph.D., justifies why distance observation ties into this photograph.

Community Support.

The third theme arose from the voices of Hermes, Anthony, Jessica, and Justin that produced Community Support. Community Support described the support needed for the participants to think about the concept of attending graduate school. Community Support was described in the manner of support from organizations and programs to peer
groups and family members. Two subthemes emerged within the theme Community Support: (a) Formal and (b) Informal.

**Formal Spaces.** This subtheme captured the formal spaces that created support for the participants. These spaces such as organizations and programs were key indicators that illustrated how the participants started gathering thoughts to pursue graduate school.

**Hermes.** Hermes, a full-time student in the biosystems engineering program captioned the photograph with the title “#PreparationAtItsBest” (Figure 4.10) in regards to the Ronald McNair Post-bachelorette Achievement Program. Hermes commented that the inspiration to enroll in the program came from his mentor when he was a first-year student. Hermes illustrated that the program provided him with all of the proper resources to pursue graduate school. He explained, “The Ronald McNair Post-bachelorette program gave me everything I needed.”

As the only participant in the study to participate in the Ronald McNair Post-bachelorette Achievement Program, Hermes provided detailed information as to why the program is very beneficial. His summation was, “It gave me something to do over the summer and the program, well as I learned more about it, the program was geared to give you really everything you really needed. There was GRE prep seminars. They would fund your research. All you had to do was find a professor that would work with you over the summer, and they really gave you the step by step on how to apply and how to look for a graduate school so that is majority of all the information I got was from the McNair Scholars program.”
Unlike many of the participants, Hermes had one of the best support systems of getting into graduate school. He was a participant in a program that provided him with the necessary tools to pursue a graduate degree. The Ronald McNair Post-bachelorette Program provided Hermes with opportunities over the summer to be engaged with faculty and their research, the program delivered GRE prep workshops, assisted with writing personal statements for school, and more. Hermes had a systematic guide in regards to graduate school.

Anthony. Anthony, a full-time student in the student affairs program, attained substantial support in the same manner as Hermes. The spaces where Anthony had learned more about graduate school and his particular major for his master’s program occurred while being in a fellows program. Through his mentor, Anthony was introduced to the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program (NUFP). The purpose of the program is to increase the number of historically disenfranchised and underrepresented professional
in student affairs and/or higher education (NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program, n.d.). Anthony stated, “We had like seminars we went to attend, and they were monthly, like our mentor requirements. It was not a course but like definitely extra stuff added to what we were doing.” The NUFP program was very instrumental to Anthony because of the exposure. He received the opportunity to attend the national conference in the field of student affairs and was in a space where the hub knowledge was disseminated.

Anthony gained information that would assist him to develop professionally, but what sparked his interest even more about graduate school was the support he received from the program. His NUFP brothers and sisters became his fuel to apply to graduate school. There was a connection made at the conference that set the graduate school trajectory for Anthony. Like-minded individuals were surrounding what stimulated the connection. To Anthony, this was his new family. He explained in a laughable manner, “I
think it helped because what I learned from my family once I switched from law to student affairs is they did not know anything about student affairs they barely knew about law school and to talk about student affairs they were just floored.” Although Anthony had laughed about the previous statement, the tone of his voice quickly changed when he furthered explained his family’s stance. Anthony stated that his family would say, “Like what are you doing with your life.” He continued to say, “that was disheartening, cause like I say, I refer to that web and that network of people that is supporting me and whenever I switched it almost felt like it dropped they were still happy that I was going to grad school but the support kind of left and so these were these people because why I look the picture suddenly I have this new web that connected me to this field and helping me to develop the determination the grit to finish all those stuff I originally got from my family but new sources.”

**Justin.** The support that Justin expressed created abundant opportunities for him to internalize the thought of being a graduate student as an undergraduate student. Justin’s photograph (Figure 4.12) of Formal Spaces represented the program that he was affiliated in his undergraduate years—PEER/WISE.
The program’s purpose is to increase diversity in science and engineering by providing services that promote success (College of Engineering, Computing and Applied Sciences, n.d). Furthermore, the services that PEER/WISE provides entail mentoring, guidance, counseling and many more that benefit students in the College of Science and Engineering. From the statements of the photograph, that Justin provided indicated that the program allowed him to meet other students that he would not have access to otherwise. “I definitely like having older students kind of guide me through and then that’s how I also met other grad students,” he explained. Moreover, Justin shared that through the graduate students he discovered the components of a dissertation and the process of conducting research.

Justin commented further that he enjoyed watching the progression of the older students and especially one in particular that he was relatively close to see him earn a Ph.D. “I know Samuel Cook graduated and so like everyone, loves Samuel. Samuel’s the guy I mean. It’s like watching him go through his whole career process until he finally graduated. He did the same as I did,” Justin explained.

Informal. This subtheme captured the Informal support that generated for the participants. These support systems included of personal relationships from family and friends that sparked the participants in wanting to pursue a master’s degree.

Jessica. For Jessica, her support stemmed from her mother. Jessica explained, “My mom is probably the number one social support I have. So I think I just kind of having her say like ‘yeah you can do it apply if you get in great! If you don’t you can always go back,’ I think just having that support has been helpful because of grad school.
Even in this two year program has been completely different then undergrad. Because in undergrad you know I had like people in my major and I had people like all around me in grad school. Its more like a co-worker kind of thing and then a lot of my friends had moved off and graduated, so I feel like mom has been very helpful as far as getting me here and keeping me here and helping me leave or graduate.”

Unlike the other participants, Jessica spoke specifically about how helpful her mother was in assisting her in the process of pursuing graduate school. It seemed as though what Jessica enjoyed the most about her mother was her ability to understand. Jessica emphasized how her mother was the outlet that she needed. Therefore, by having the emotional support from her mother contributed to Jessica’s decision to pursue graduate school (Figure 4.13).
Anthony. For Anthony, his decision-making process to pursue a master’s degree was captured in under one main theme centered on Community Support. He gathered support from formal spaces, which included the NUFP program, but the remainder of his four photographs fitted under the subtheme Informal. These are photographs taken of his family and friends.

At the beginning of the photo-elicitation interview, Anthony highlighted that his family members were the reason why he first started conceptualizing graduate school education. He explained that “the pressure” to advance his education stemmed from his immediate family. Furthermore, that his family assisted with him understanding what “grit and determination” meant to him as an individual. When Anthony was explaining this photograph, he seemed to convey that he was the leader that everyone looked up to in the family. Anthony sounded confident about the unassigned role that was given to him. He explained, “My family some of them come from a lower economic standpoint… we didn’t have money passed down. We had to fight and kind of figure out how we were going to get money, and so when I decided I wanted to be a lawyer, they were like ‘oh his boy is going to get somewhere get money and help the rest of us’, so they were the ones who pressured me.” To Anthony, this was implicit responsible that he would soon have to be the breadwinner in the family. Monetary benefits were one of the primary reasons support was given to Anthony about graduate school. (Figure 4.14).
Although Anthony did not pursue law school, it still shifted his mindset into thinking about what is graduate school is all about. His mentor and resident assistant (RA) in undergraduate was quite an inspiration for Anthony. (Figure 4.15 #RANUFP)
Anthony provided the details of the relevance of his mentor and resident assistant, “So she was like a senior RA and we did not really know each other. I just knew her as this RA, then she hired me as a conference assistant.” In a sense, Anthony’s RA turned into his mentor once she recognized the gifts and talents that Anthony posed. Additionally, he explained “She was my supervisor and in that she got me in NUFP. She was in NUPF, so we both were in NUPF at the same time and then she went off to grad school.” By watching his mentor pursue her master’s in the field, that they both enjoyed, encouraged Anthony to follow the same trajectory.

Anthony’s next photograph captured his Clemson NUFP family (Figure 4.16).
Although the photograph represented a stage in Anthony’s journey after he had made the decision to pursue graduate school, he thought the photograph would still add value to the interview. “When I made it into Clemson this was when we realized how many NUFPs were in our program. We took a Clemson NUFP picture, so this was like linking the NUPF family to Clemson and establishing some more grit and determination here to complete because we were all in the same boat. We all came from backgrounds that didn’t really know much about higher education and to pull from that, and create like a system to always be able to just lean on each other,” Anthony stated. Therefore, it was imperative to Anthony that he would be surrounded individuals from the same background with common goals. The group consisted of first generation college students and disenfranchised racial individuals. This NUFP group of individuals made Anthony feel at home when he arrived at the University site.

Although Anthony had his Clemson NUPF family, he stressed the fact that his primary source of support at the University site stems from three other individuals. (Figure 4.17).

Figure 4.17 #ClemsonQuad
As Anthony sat back in the chair and smiled, he described his last photograph in the interview. “Here is most recent picture. These are my closet friends right now in graduate school and this our quad. We call ourselves the quad. All four of us and we have been experiencing grad school together as a family like everybody else. We know we network and we get to form relationships with everybody else, but this is the group of people that I lean in on the most. Whenever I need to figure something out, talk about work things like these are the confidants. These are the people that will be my student affairs friends whenever we get older and go off to different schools. So it’s like oh I know someone at this place these are the people I’m going to know in like Texas state or anywhere.”

For Anthony, his Clemson quad family is important because it is his primary source of support. Even some of him Clemson quad family are NUFP members as well. Anthony’s reason why his Clemson quad family is important because they all navigated graduate school together and they shared information amongst each other during the process. From the conclusion of Anthony’s interview, it was apparent that the Clemson quad family played an integral part in assisting Anthony through the process of applying to graduate school.

**Justin.** Unlike other participants, Justin received his informal support differently. Having someone to sell the idea of pursuing a master’s degree was critical for Justin. The main office in the College of Engineering and Sciences was the approach he utilized to figure out if graduate school was for him. He described his experience of being in the main office, “I’m at the car dealership, which is the main office now and they are kind of selling me on to grad school.” This was the location that Justin inquired information
about the five-year program, which entailed him with receiving his undergraduate and master’s degree in five years. He states how one of the unassigned advisors was the “conduit” for him getting into the program. Furthermore, that she was instrumental in the process between him merely being an undergraduate student and graduate student. “They gave me the recipe for getting into graduate school,” Justin explains. There in the main office, he was provided with information for GPA requirements and classes that was needed for him to transition into the five-year program. (Figure 4.18).

During the interview, it was not clear about how Justin learned about the five-year program. Though he acknowledged that the main office was the key factor that provided him with confidence to continue on to receive another degree. He commended the office for providing him with the “next steps” to continue to enroll in the five-year program. Justin especially by commended his unassigned advisor. He felt as though he found a friend in his advisor that provided him the information. He trusted her judgment most of
Justin believed that she was looking out for his best interest, which was key to his success. He spoke about how he still goes by his former advisor’s office to see her regularly and to greet her with a hug.

**Summary of Community Support**

Community Support examined the support the participants received from organizations and programs and other support received from family and friends. The patterns of responses among the four participants covered the theme of Community Support. The participants cited moments where they were supported in regards to pursuing graduate school.

Within the Formal subtheme, three participants demonstrated having strong and intentional support systems. For example, the Ronald McNair Postbachelorette Achievement Program, the NASPA Undergraduate Fellows Program, and the PEER/WISE program all had a substantial effect on the participants in deciding to pursue master’s degree. Through all of these programs, the participants were able to “get connected” with the proper resources to help them get into graduate school. This was valuable because these participants had proper directions and step-by-step guides to assist them in the process of applying to graduate school.

Within the Informal subtheme, family and friends demonstrated an integral part in pushing the participants toward graduate school. Phrases such as “experiencing grad school together as a family” and “create like a system to always be able to just lean on each other” displayed why some of the photographs were best suited to be underneath the subtheme Informal.
Collectively, Hermes, Anthony, Jessica, and Justin articulated ways in how their support systems were helpful in getting them into graduate school. Three participants cited how programs helped guide them to apply for their master’s degrees. In the same token, family and friends supported the participants as well by having positive words of encouragement or by providing constructive criticism to push them to apply for graduate school.

**Life Strategies.**

The fourth theme that emerged from the voices of six participants to produce the theme Life Strategies. Life Strategies described how six of the eight participants went about questioning and figuring out how to navigate through the process of graduate school and deciding if it would be the best fit for them due to their financial health. Two subthemes emerged from Life Strategies: (a) Navigation and (b) Funding.

**Navigation.** This subtheme examined how participants used their resources to understand graduate school. Within this subtheme, all of the participants had a conscious interest of graduate school and explored what it was about through networking and the Internet.

**Hermes.** For Hermes, the way the colleges presented themselves to the public was an indication whether or not he wanted to attend a certain institution. After the decision had been made to pursue graduate school, Hermes started to look at different colleges’ websites. Hermes explained, “I mean I will make a lot of judgments based on what I was seeing on the website. If it was really cheap, I was like ahhh, this school doesn’t take really good care of their website, is this the place I want to be? So, that
already gave me a few clues of the type of place I was going to.” He titled his photograph to be #CollegeWebsite (Figure 4.19).

Figure 4.19 #CollegeWebsite

Furthermore, Hermes made decisions based on graduate school selection according to information on the US News Report. The US News Report provided Hermes with college rankings and statistical information that helped him gather a better sense of what the graduate programs had to offer. Hermes first learned about the US News Report through the Ronald McNair Program. “Oh so this one, was mainly the highlight of the Ronald McNair Post Bachelorette Achievement Program. That pretty much gave me everything that I needed,” Hermes explained. He titled his photograph #USNewsEducation (Figure 4.20).
Lastly, because of the Ron McNair Program, Hermes was introduced to the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) preparation workshops. He stated how his scores were significantly high due to the preparation workshops that the Ron McNair Program had to offer (Figure 4.21).
Through the workshops, this became a strategy for Hermes to position himself to be an ideal candidate while applying to graduate school. “They kind of gave me the confidence to tackle the bigger schools because my GRE scores were so well. Well yeah, they faired very well amongst the bigger schools. So, it gave me more confidence to attack those bigger ones and they were instrumental in the application phase because I had training that was provided by them through McNair. So I was able to tackle that test a lot more effectively.” Hermes explained. He furthered explained the specific strategies that the Ron McNair program offered as it related to GRE preparation. “McNair had GRE courses; you know they give us two books. We had practice tests about three or four of them over the summer. We just worked for two hours or three; I cannot really remember it went kind of like a blur. We would just study test mechanics, and they would make us study flash cards and learn new words.”

Unlike other participants, Hermes was effectively equipped to pursue graduate school while earning his bachelorette degree. He learned specific strategies on how to navigate the process of getting into graduate school. By having this toolset, made it easier for him to believe that graduate school could be attainable.

**Noelle.** Similar to Hermes in regards to utilizing the Internet to access information about graduate school, Noelle captured a photograph of Google to reference the same point. (Figure 4.22)
Noelle stated, “Google! Google is my friend. I think don’t even know how many hours I spent on Google just typing in whatever, just going to whatever page looking at rankings and requirements. Such as pre-requisites to get in programs the cost of programs then going to YouTube.” For Noelle, one of the key sources to retrieving information about graduate school was using social media. “So like I would use Google to figure out okay, well this career to figure out what do people need or Google people that I saw with degrees that they had. Then go look at those programs to see what they required to get in. Then I would go to YouTube to see what and then most programs have like YouTube programs, where there’s students speaking about their everyday life,” Noelle further explained. Ultimately, Noelle used social media to gain a feel for the programs and authenticity from current graduate students.

Joe. Similar to both Noelle and Hermes in regards to the college website, Joe utilized his laptop and educational websites to decipher if graduate school was for him (Figure 4.23)
“The picture pretty much just because of the Internet, seeking out just any type of information. So it is a picture of my laptop that I had for several years now, it is about seven years old, but that same laptop that I begin just searching for what I was just interested in. My first search of graduate programs at the time when I first started. I was not particularly looking at schools I was specifically just looking at what I wanted to do. Therefore, at the time I knew I did not want to do like a Ph.D. I did not want to do the long-term academic track, but also there was just certain things that I work through you know looking at education programs specific,” Joe explained.

**Jessica.** For Jessica, she referred to similar sentiments that Hermes had about the graduate school websites. Hermes mentioned how graduate school websites should look very presentable and attractive, and if not, he would not have any interest in applying. Jessica echoed this notion while stating, “I guess it was easier to photograph the website because I was familiar with it. In addition, just going to other school websites the information was not just readily available and the colors were different. I guess what stands out to me was that I was familiar, but it was just easier to navigate and it was attractive and kind of welcoming if say. I know people who say it is very attractive, it is
and that what gets people to go in at particular schools the comparison of the websites I say for Ph.D. I was like I don’t want to go here, and I know that is bad.” Jessica provided the photograph #GradWebsite to demonstrate the importance of having an attractive college website to attract graduate students (Figure 4.2).

![GradWebsite](image)

*Figure 4.2 #OneDegreeTwoDegrees2Go*

Interestingly, how colleges and graduate schools marketed their programs, sent out strong messages to Hermes and Jessica. As Jessica continued to express her thoughts on college websites, she brought up the idea of how important it was to read about student experiences on college websites. Jessica’s viewpoint was similar to Noelle’s thoughts as well. “As far as the information that out there it kind of determines what’s useful and what not because I is felt like the information on the website was helpful, but what was very helpful was having anecdotes to the programs and what that meant and what grad school look like grad school look like especially in counseling curriculum,” Jessica explained.
Justin. Following similar viewpoints from the other participants, Justin captured the college website to elaborate on how it help him to strategize to seek information in regards to graduate school (Figure 4.25). “His photo basically it’s just like the main page for university’s biology engineering for grad school. It kind of told me how much tuition was it made me familiar with what the whole thing. It told me about different tracks I could take it told me about the Master of Science track I could take, the master or engineering track. I could do a thesis or non-thesis it just laid out all the technical guidelines for what I kind of had to look out for as for as graduate school was concerned. Just something to kind of get some substance,” Justin explained.

*Figure 4.25 #Website*

The other source that Justin used to strategize to determine if graduate school would be the right fit for him was to use his “network” of people. He captured a symbolic photograph of Library Bridge, which symbolizes the whole campus and illustrates his networks with people (Figure 4.26).
Justin explained that the “word of mouth” about graduate school was instrumental about how he decided to pursue a master’s degree. Similar to Noelle and Jessica, Justin attends the same institution for his master’s degree as he did for his undergraduate degree. Therefore, the connections that he made with other graduate students assisted him in the transition in the master’s program for engineering at the same institution. Networks with individuals who are in the Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA) and other different programs helped Justin to strategize to see if the goal of becoming a graduate student attainable. The questions that he asked such as, “how do I apply” and “which professors are good,” helped set him on the right trajectory. Ultimately, he was provided with the upper hand by having the “inside knowledge” of graduate school life without having to “read it off of a pamphlet.”
Danielle. Danielle had a unique experience as to how she decided to pursue graduate school. The navigation concerns that Danielle expressed were a dichotomy to one another. She labeled her concerns as #RightDecisionWrongDecision (Figure 4.27).

Figure 4.27 #RightDecisionWrongDecision

This stage in Danielle’s life took place right after clicking the submit button to apply for her master’s program. Once after all of the paperwork was completed, she still had turmoil whether or not pursuing her master’s degree was the best option. She disclosed, “I know I made the right decision. But, it’s kind of like, is it the wrong decision, because I could be using this time to actually start my own business versus taking a year off to learn how to be an entrepreneur when everything I feel like I’m learning, I could have learned without the program.” Danielle had challenges with the notion was this move into the program worth it. She questioned this idea before taking classes for her master’s program, and even after.

Despite Danielle having doubt on whether or not she made the correct route with her life, she felt that it was still better than job-hopping. “I was wasting my time going
from job to job to job,” she expressed with exhaustion. Even though she did not feel 100% comfortable in her decision, Danielle still felt like she was taking ownership over her life in a positive way. “Okay, I can do something productive with my life and try to make up the time for the three half years that I lost and try to reach my goals.” One aspect of navigating into the program that Danielle felt confident about was that the program would make her more marketable. “How will this curriculum help me to be an attorney?” Danielle asked her before applying and even after. Towards the end of the conversation, she stated, “I can’t explain it. It’s complicated.” Overall Danielle felt it was the correct move to make. “Applying to this program, I know it was the right decision,” stated in her concluding thoughts of the photograph.

**Funding.** The second subtheme for Life Strategies, Funding, included financial reasons why the participants decided to pursue graduate school.

**Hermes.** For many of the participants, funding was a key indicator whether or not they would pursue graduate school. During the interview, Hermes shared his funding strategy to receive money for school through the National Science Foundation (NSF), which is geared towards providing science majors money for school. “So that was a technique that I really wish I would have hit harder, but that was a database for all of the grants that the NSF give out. So NSF is you now…they sponsor most of the research in engineering, I mean I am sure you have some department of defense, some department of energy,” Hermes explained. He went on further to say, “But National Science Foundation I figured was a pretty sound place to start so a lot of times there will be cross-listed. So NSF their whole database you can search any type of topic and if you search the topic
you can see who was given money for what, how much, and how long it’s going to last.” Therefore, finding money was significant to Hermes for him to apply for graduate school. (Figure 4.2).

Danielle. Danielle determined that pursuing a master’s degree was an appropriate choice for due to “job hopping.” She captains the photograph #NoJobNoMoneyNowWhat (Figure 4.29).
Although Danielle had jobs, she could not find the job that was considered as an ideal career. Her first job was in China, but then she worked at a grocery store as a cashier after coming back from working overseas. “I was miserable,” said in a low voice. By being wrapped up in those emotions encouraged her to change her situation. As a result, Danielle made a decision to pursue a master’s degree, which she thought was the best decision that could of have been made. “I felt like I’m here, because no job, no money, sparked me to create my own opportunity,” Danielle explained. Through much reflection, while job hopping, Danielle felt as if obtaining an MBA with an emphasis in entrepreneurship would spark her in creating the opportunity that she desired. The opportunity to have a fulfilling career.

Danielle felt that she could still have the career she wanted without pursuing a master’s degree, although it would make better sense to pursue another degree. “A degree is your insurance,” she explained when describing the credentials. “People want to see it in an interview. That’s what sparked me to get it,” as Danielle went on describing the perceptions of obtaining a 2nd degree.

Complementary to her thoughts about the photograph #NoJobNoMoneyNowWhat, Danielle continued her conversation about centered on money. Essentially, the importance of having a great status, so one can produce financial means to support their family. “My parents were born in the 50s and both of them have bachelor’s degrees…even my grandma,” therefore Danielle viewed education as being vital and assumed that a bachelor’s degree was expected for her to achieve. “I felt like my
grandma being born in the 30s having a bachelor’s degree and both of my parents having a bachelor’s degree is what sparked me to get a bachelor degree.”

Although Danielle knew that a bachelor’s degree expected of her, she clearly still could hear her mom say “be better than me.” Recalling those moments, assisted Danielle on the trajectory of continuing her education too. “Growing up they [as in parents] put us in a situation where we didn’t want for anything,” as she expounded on speaking of the moments with her mom and dad. Danielle even addressed the fact that she had never seen hard times, “I don’t know what’s like to have the lights out. I don’t know what it’s like to go without food or without clothing on the shelves.” Slumped in her seat to explain further, Danielle stated, “Every Christmas it was gifts under the tree. When we went in the grocery store…my parents paid for groceries out of cash.”

After the previous conservation, this is where the caveat took place. There were emotions that Danielle was strongly trying to convey during this stage of the interview. It seemed as though she described one of the lowest parts of her life. “In a point of my where I felt like I had to apply for food stamps, it was a situation where I was very prideful,” she explained in a low-spirited way. The thought that her parents had never had to get on government assistance distraught her. She was in a space in life where this was a need. “I just couldn’t get myself to do, but I was in a situation where I was… ‘I need to stop being prideful. I am going to do what I have to do to take care of myself. It’s a temporary situation.’” She even went on to say “It was bad…I didn’t even want to pull it out.” Unlike the other participants in the interview, Danielle was the most descriptive one. She provided more authentic and raw descriptions of what led her to pursue a
master’s degree. She continued to provide content to how she processed having to need an EBT card, “I used to literally go into the self-checkout line because I was just really prideful. It just wasn’t something that I grew up needing…I’m not saying I’m better than anyone, but I just wasn’t used to it.” She finished her statement by saying, “I just felt like my parents work hard, so I just shouldn’t have to…I should use my money.”

To this end, by experiencing those emotions of humiliation, centered on a lack of money, it created emotions of motivation to apply for graduate school. Danielle was determined to try to reach a higher socioeconomic status for herself. “It was my motivation,” as she referred to her previous electronic benefit transfer (EBT) card (Figure 4.30). A card that allows recipients who need money to purchase food items.

Figure 4.30 #EBT

Danielle explained, “I honestly think if I got a job right after undergrad that paid me well, I probably wouldn’t have applied, but like I said, I didn’t have any plans on getting a master’s.” Unlike the other participants in the study, Danielle’s sole purpose of pursuing a master’s degree circulated around having that financial means that she desired for her life. “If I did not go through those trenches and applying for EBT… not having a job… staying at my mom’s home…I probably wouldn’t even click the button or even
went online or researched MBA emphasis in entrepreneurship and wanting to create my opportunity.”

Danielle further explained more about the importance of money by utilizing parallels to another book she had read called “The Power of Being Broke.” She provided background information in regards to the author and the context of the book. “His name is Daymond something, but he created the line FUBU. FUBU doesn’t exist anymore, but he’s still reaping the benefits off of it, because it grew to be a billion dollar company.” Danielle further said, “He wrote the book and it pretty much state how being broke and not having a job allow you have the mindset to create your own opportunity.” She then started to reflect and indicated that if she had not gone through hard times of needing to apply for EBT, she would not know how it would feel to be broke. Therefore, it would be hard to create an opportunity if she did not notice a huge void. To sum up the photograph of the EBT, she merely said, “I’m glad it happened. It’s all a life lesson.”

Even the next stages for Danielle in her process in deciding to figure out if she wanted to pursue a master’s degree was still based on money. As her steps progressed in the decision-making process of choosing to go back to school, Danielle’s discussion shifted to unwanted debt. Danielle’s photograph captioned #Debt (Figure 4.31) illustrated her thoughts on unwanted debt as a deciding factor.

Figure 4.31 #Debt
“Like I said, the first motivation was not having a job, but then when I actually clicked the button to apply, I know that I didn’t want a lot debt,” Danielle explained. Therefore, as she viewed the institution of choice, she decided that it was not that expensive. During this stage, Danielle approached graduate school as a cost-benefit analysis solution. It was important for her to make a rational decision about returning to school for more education. “I can’t remember, but it wasn’t as expensive. It was less than my undergrad,” Danielle remarked. Still, until the interview, her concerns were focused on financial stability after she graduates. She continued to explain that the plan after completing her master’s degree would be law school. Therefore, she had already started calculating how much money it would cost for her education in total.

Joe. For Joe, he captured a dollar bill to make the connections to why he decided to pursue graduate school (Figure 4.32).

![Figure 4.32 #DollarBill](image)

“Here is a dollar bill but the concept is money that’s all I have, you really do need money to do things in life. Just the ability to potentially make more money and give back. Not saying I want to be a millionaire,” Joe explained.
Fundamentally, Joe saw earning more education could position him in a place where potentially he could make more money. However, unlike the other participants, Joe place emphasized on receiving money to be a financial assistance to other individuals than himself.

Jessica. Another signature reason why Jessica viewed graduate school websites was the proclivity that she would not find a job in her field of study. Jessica described the story of her ‘aha moment’ when she realized that she needed another career option. “The light bulb came on sitting in social psychology, and I was bored, so I decided to look up jobs with psychology, and I didn’t find anything. So, I was like okay you may have to find other options instead of just graduating with just a bachelor’s degree in psychology,” Jessica explained about her photograph (Figure 4.33).

Figure 4.33 #MakeItYourOwn
Jessica figured out that one of her options could be to pursue a master’s degree. Although it would be a catch 22 to it, as Jessica put it. Jessica had mixed feelings about pursuing more education because of the debt that came with it. She explained, “I do feel like even psychology and how important mental health is it’s just not valued in our society that’s a little depressing because there are not a lot of resources. There are not a lot of funding it for things that I feel like we need especially in the black community so I think that was another reason that kind of motivated me to keep pushing because I was like okay I want to do more.” Though Jessica stated these feelings, in the same breath, she was grateful that her student loans were not a current issue. As a full-time graduate student, she had the opportunity to defer her loans. To Jessica, pursuing graduate school seemed like the better choice by temporarily escape her loan obligation. (Figure 4.34)
Summary of Life Strategies

Life Strategies examined how participants went about questioning and figuring out how to navigate through the process of deciding to pursue graduate school and selecting the institution. Furthermore, it examined how participants decided if graduate school would be the best fit for them due to their financial health. The participants asked themselves intentional questions if a master’s degree would be a good fit for them or should they go immediately into the workforce. Although every participant in the study had specific strategies in determining if a master’s program would be a good fit for them; however, some participants’ strategies were more salient than others were.

Within the Navigation subtheme, Hermes’s description of his photograph of the college website highlighted why it fitted underneath the subtheme. Comments such as “I will make a lot of judgments based on what I was seeing on the website. If it was really cheap, I was like ahhh, this school doesn’t take really good care of their website, is this the place I want to be?” confirmed why this was a navigation process for Hermes. Jessica echoed Hermes sentiments by stating, “Just going to other school websites the information was not just readily available, and the colors were different. I guess what stands out to me was that I was familiar, but it was just easier to navigate, and it was attractive and kind of welcoming if say.” Both of their comments demonstrated how marketing could influence prospective students in their decisions that make towards graduate school. On the other hand, Justin used his “networks of peers” to assist him in navigating into graduate school. The navigation process looked both similar and different for many of the participants.
Within the Funding subtheme, Danielle demonstrated the most emotions in regards to why funding was a high value in her deciding to pursue graduate school. Danielle made comments such as “If I did not go through those trenches and applying for EBT… not having a job… staying at my mom’s home… I probably wouldn’t even click the button or even went online or researched MBA emphasis in entrepreneurship and wanting to create my opportunity.” Similar to Danielle, Jessica saw graduate school as an opportunity to find a job and escape from her loans for a while.

Collectively, six of the eight participants in the study articulated strategies that they used to go to graduate school after the final decision was made that they were indeed going. Many of the participants shared logistical steps when they shared their strategies. In contrast, other participants shared deeper meaning that exposed more of their emotions when they shared their strategies as well. However, an equal blend of logistical steps and deeper meaning from the participants that went into the strategy process of pursuing graduate school.

Identity Influences.

The fifth and final theme that developed came from the collective voice of Noelle, Joe, and Charity to produce Identity Influences. Identity Influences described how the participants decided to pursue graduate school because of having the desire to live an intentional, purposeful life for the people surrounding them or the desire to reach their optimal potential in life for themselves. Identity Influences is supported by two subthemes: (a) Purpose and (b) Legitimacy.
**Purpose.** The Subtheme, Purpose, described how Noelle and Joe had the desire to find meaning outside of themselves. These two participants felt obligated that they had to pursue a graduate degree to influence others around them to reach their highest potentials.

**Noelle.** Noelle provided a unique photograph in the photo-elicitation interview, which consisted of pure blackness. She captured a photograph of pure “blackness” to represent her identity and titled the photograph #EverythingThatIAm (Figure 4.35).

![Figure 4.35 #EverythingThatIAm](image)

With pride, Noelle spoke about her great-grandmother who had a Ph.D. in education and how this woman set the tone for all of the Black women in her family who came after. Through her stories about her great-grandmother, Noelle spoke about a sense of obligation to being a strong Black woman because of this particular woman. In regards to those sentiments, she sounded confident commenting on the reason why she pursued a master’s degree because it would be “disrespectful in a sense” for her not to and that she would be “settling being lazy or just being complement” if she did not achieve this goal. Noelle elaborated on the #EverythingThatIAm photograph stating, “I did the Black picture because it’s not just about the color of my skin. It is about everything! Like for all
people. The opportunity. The fact that I’m even here now like what this means for us and other people looking at me or for the people in my program, you know making that more diverse or like letting other people know we can go straight to grad school?” Noelle essentially encapsulated all of those characteristics that she heard about her great-grandmother through stories, to produce why was she in graduate school. It primarily focused on her identity and feelings of purpose.

Joe. Positive feelings of obligation arose during Joe’s interview. The underlining tone that was received from him was that he had a social responsibility or obligation to his family, and especially his community. Joe captioned one photograph with the titled, #The19thWarMyCommunity (Figure 4.36).

Figure 4.36 #The19thWarMyCommunity
The photograph was the community at which Joe grew up in. Symbolically, the picture represented the need to pay it forward. Since he believed, his core values were instilled in him in his community that he had to turn around and make a difference for his community. While describing the photograph he stated, “Something my mom would always tell us coming up that our job was to lead this world to a better place.”

When asked the question, “what stands out to you most about the photograph,” he stated in disheartening words, “It was just so much life [the photograph of his community], but it is not that place anymore. It has grown to more people losing their jobs and unfortunately people losing their income. This a community that is statically where ninety percent of the kids are free or reduced lunch where businesses are nonexistent where the two elementary schools are closed down. You lose a sense of community, so that motivated to do this urban planning.” Therefore, one of the factors that influenced Joe’s decision to pursue more education resulted in the sense of obligation and feelings of legitimacy. Furthermore, this decision was tailor towards his decision to pursue City and Regional Planning, which is a major focused on land, community management, and planning.

Additionally, Joe stated one of the reasons why he decided to pursue a master’s degree was because of his family. Unlike Anthony that received support from his family through the means of “pressure” to pursue a graduate degree, Joe received a sense of purpose from his family. (Figure 4.37).
Joe explained, “I wanted to really give back to my family. In a sense, this goes back to that belief their part of that reason why I decided to take this journey up. Because I wanted to number one, make them proud, but also I wanted to ensure that I gave back to my family and that I gave them something to be proud of me for. I mean they’re proud of me you know but just going that extra mile.”

Joe’s goal is to build his families legacy through their encouraging support. His ultimate goal is to make his family members proud, especially his mom. As Joe is one of seven children. “I guess when you are around your family you want to make them proud. You want to ensure that your nieces and nephews know that you persevered through this difficult graduate school experience,” Joe explained.

Although Joe credits his family and in particularly his mom for providing him with a purpose, he acknowledged more of his family members who are not connected to
him physically right now. The ones who are deceased—his grandparents. “They came up north, and tried to make a difference for their family and their lives they eventually moved from this predominately African American neighborhood to this other side of town. Better neighborhood better schools for their children, for my uncles and my aunts to ensure they went to better schools, and that they went to college,” as Joe described his grandparents. To Joe, his grandparents were the ones who laid the foundation for his family, especially his grandfather by being the bricklayer of the foundation. Joe elaborated on how his grandparents gave his life purpose by stating, “Two of the people that I admire the most because they didn’t get to see this day. They did not get to attend my high school graduation, my college graduation. My grandfather died like eleven years ago and my grandmother has had Alzheimer’s for fifteen years from dementia to full Alzheimer. She is still alive, but she’s in a complete vegetable state been in it for quite a few years now.”

After Joe had spoken about his grandmother, he transitioned to speak about his grandfather. During this transition, the tone of his voice shifted. Joe’s words became slower and more emotions surfaced as he spoke. “My grandfather was always there. As kind of like he was my right-hand man—my partner. When I was a kid, I would do things in church like little skits and go to conferences and he was always saying ‘you gone be an engineer. You gone make a lot of money.’ I just always want to make them proud. They grew up in segregated south. My grandfather never finished high school, my grandmother only went to about eighth grade. So if they were here today, if I could beam them here to Clemson, they would be so proud of me, and how far they come.”
By making his family proud, and especially his grandfather, served as an excellent catalyst for Joe in the reason why he decided to pursue more education. He was living more of a life of purpose. Similar to Noelle, whose purpose was to make her deceased great-grandmother proud, Joe wanted to do the same for his deceased grandfather and continue building on the foundation that his grandfather started.

**Legitimacy.** The second subtheme, Legitimacy, described how Noelle and Joe had the desire to reach their optimal potential life for themselves. By having this mindset about how they make decisions, it influenced them to decide to pursue graduate school. Another form of Legitimacy that surfaced was the notion of self-doubt also known as the imposter syndrome, which persuaded Charity to decide to pursue graduate school.

**Noelle.** During the entire interview with Noelle, she exuded confidence. Therefore, it was not astonishing when she presented a photograph titled #TheRoadLessTraveled. Metaphorically speaking, someone who takes 'the road less traveled' is freeing themselves from the conformity of other individuals. Furthermore, the person is largely deciding their choices and possibly leaving a new trajectory that will turn into the road more often traveled. The photograph that Noelle presented for the #RoadLessTraveled represented the aforementioned description. Noelle knew she was young and was pursuing goals that many other individuals would find to be unattainable. Therefore, Noelle wanted to maintain this way of life, and for that reason, she pursued graduate school.
Joe. Joe provided a photograph of himself titled #Selfie (Figure 4.39). Joe stated that this photograph represented himself striving to grow as a person, hence the reason for pursuing more education. He framed this photograph in a sense that for someone to make a difference in the lives of others, a person has to invest in himself or herself. Joe stated, “People forget to think about their self that there growing as a person.”

Out of all of the eight participants, Joe was the only individual to provide a photograph of himself.
Charity. Unlike Noelle and Joe, who felt confident in their abilities, Charity's depiction of herself was different. Charity took a photograph displaying her self-doubt, such as having feelings of the imposter syndrome, and she titled it, #PaperPlanes. (Figure 4.40).

The photograph displays a paper plane that is in the ground as though it has crashed. Symbolically, Charity compares herself to this paper plane structure, to demonstrate lingering feelings of self-doubt. These feelings arose after being rejected from a job, which ultimately directed her to graduate school immediately following undergrad. “Yeah and that's kind of how I felt about the whole trajectory I was on for like the first year of grad school. Um and my decision overall. I felt like I was a folded beautifully. I was supposed to fly and all that stuff and just bam into the ground,” Charity explained. Although Charity had an intellectual thirst for knowledge, her original
plans after receiving her bachelors were to work in industry a few years, then return back to school. Furthermore, Charity explained, “Um, because I did still even after like I got over the whole like well you know you are good enough, you did this whatever. I went through like...it was this sort of like post grad drop. Like space, if you will. Everything just did not seem right. Nothing seemed to fit. I was great I'm only good enough to do is take more school. That was the continuation of what I was already struggling with when I was deciding to go to grad school.”

The noticeably underlining message I received by hearing the symbolic story of the paper planes was that Charity had been led immediately to graduate school by self-doubt. Before even beginning graduate school, Charity was battling the self-imposter syndrome. She sounded a little defeated when she stated, “So I felt like the plane was um, that didn't live up to it's potential.” At the conclusion of speaking about the photograph, she realized the lack of a job opportunity redirected her back to what should have been the first priority for herself, which was pursuing a master’s degree.

**Summary of Identity Influences.**

Identity Influences examined how the participants decided to pursue graduate school because of having the desire to live an intentional purposeful life for the people surrounding them or the desire to reach their optimal potential in life for themselves. Once the interviews were unpacked, the participants had an underline tone that their identities directed to a master’s program, but only three of the eight participants had explicit words in their interviews indicating that their identities were a factor that helped with making the decision to attend a master’s program.
Within the Purpose subtheme, Joe’s usage of words such as “make them proud” and “make sure that I give back” confirmed why purpose was a factor in his decision to pursue graduate school. Noelle’s selection of words such as “on the road less traveled” and “color of my skin” also supported her photographs in being positioned under the subtheme Purpose. Both individuals shared words that were more idealistic than the other participants were. Their idealistic way of thinking helped them to have goals of helping other individuals around them.

Within the Legitimacy subtheme, Joe’s usage of words such as “people forget to think about their self that there growing as a person” demonstrated how obligations to oneself should be a factor as well in making decisions. Unlike Joe, Charity’s usage of words indicated that she was faced with the imposter syndrome when deciding to pursue graduate school. The emotions she that she encountered helped her to make the decision to go.

Collectively, Noelle, Joe, and Charity articulated words that demonstrated their desire to live the best lives as possible. The three individuals strive to perfection, which resulted in them pursuing a graduate degree. The individuals listened to stories that their families told them about their great-grandmother or grandfather and rehearsed these stories profusely to start acting like the individuals that they strived to be like. For Noelle, she wanted to emulate her great-grandmother. For Joe, he wanted to emulate his grandfather. To both Noelle’s great-grandmother and Joe’s grandfather, education was highly valued. Therefore, this helped these individuals to decide to pursue graduate school education.
Study’s Answers to the Research Questions

This section presents results for the three research questions. The overall research questions guided this study: How do Black master’s students process knowledge about going to graduate school? Secondary research questions included the following: (1) What are the factors that led Black master’s students to pursue graduate school? (2) What are Black master’s students’ critical moments that led them to graduate school? The photo-elicitation interviews, photographs, and hashtags supplied the findings to answer the research questions. Field notes and a personal journal were both supplements with the data findings to answer among eight Black master’s students at one University.

Overarching Research Question

The purpose of the overarching research question was to see how the students processed the facts, information, and awareness about graduate student. This question was answered more in depth through the photo-map activity. Photo-map was a used for this research study to examine the process. During the photo-elicitation interviews, participants were asked to arrange their five photographs in any significant order. The participants’ visual representation of their photo-maps and commentaries are listed below for each individual. The visual representation is on the following page (Figure 4.41).
Photo-maps Visualization

(Figure 4.41)

1. Hermes
2. Charity
3. Danielle
4. Anthony
5. Noelle
6. Joe
7. Jessica
8. Justin
Hermes. Hermes’ described how he processed all of the photographs collectively as he gained knowledge, information, and facts about graduate school. Here are the photographs as he ranked them in (Figure 4.41):

1. #PreparationAtItsBest
2. #CollegeWebsite
3. #NationalScienceFoundation
4. #GRE
5. #USNewsEducation

As Hermes placed the photographs in his order preference, he briefly explained the process of how he arranged the photographs. The first photograph represented the support that Hermes had to get into graduate school. Hermes explained the next four photographs, “the Clemson one [photograph], that’s probably second. Just because that was representative of how I used university websites to pick out, you know of what the school was. It kind of made information from the NSF website a little more real. Then the GRE, then last would be the top 100.”

Hermes believed that if none of the occurrences would have happened that he would not be in graduate school now. He explained, “I don’t know if I would have [been in graduate school]. I think I would have started working and just got use to that. It would have been a very unsatisfying life for me, but that’s probably what would have had to happen.” Hermes photographs indicated how significant his support from the McNair program was to him. The McNair program then led him to other elements that helped him decide to pursue graduate school.
Charity. Charity described how she processed all of the photographs collectively as she gained knowledge, information, and facts about graduate school. Here are the photographs as she ranked them (Figure 4.41):

1. #GrandfathersThesis
2. #ABELincoln
3. #MyProfessor
4. #PaperPlanes
5. #QualitativeMethods

As Charity placed the photographs in her order preference, she explained the process of how she arranged the photographs. The first photograph displayed how Charity first started to learn about graduate school at an early age. “I didn't really know what it meant,” Charity said, “but I knew it existed and some people who were close to me had achieved it.” Charity ranked the remainder of the photographs without an explanation. This indicated that the first photograph was very significant in Charity’s process of gathering facts, information, and awareness about graduate school.

Charity believed that if none of the occurrences would have happened that she would not be in graduate school now. She explained, “No. I don't, without these little episodes. I wouldn't be here at this time. I don't feel like. I think I probably would've waited.” Charity continued on to say, “I probably would’ve done it at some point but not now and not in the way that I'm currently doing it. It just would be...it would be. I can't really imagine what it would be like but I definitely wouldn't be here at this juncture. As I am in grad school.”
Danielle. Danielle described how she processed all of the photographs collectively as she gained knowledge, information, and facts about graduate school. Here are the photographs as she ranked them (Figure 4.41):

1. #RightDecisionWrongDecision
2. #YouAreABadAss
3. #EBT
4. #NoJobNowWhat
5. #Debt

As Danielle placed the photographs in her order preference, she stated that debt would be last. “I am worried about it, but I feel like I can’t worry about debt when it comes to getting a good education,” Danielle explained.

Additionally, Danielle believed that if none of these occurrences had happened then she would not be pursuing a master’s degree. She felt like she needed to hit rock bottom by using an EBT card for her to understand the value of a higher socioeconomic status.

Anthony. Anthony described how he processed all of the photographs collectively as he gained knowledge, information, and facts about graduate school. Here are the photographs as he ranked them (Figure 4.41):

1. #FamilyReunion
2. #Mentor
3. #NUFP
4. #ClemsonNUFPFamily
5. #TheQuad

Anthony positioned the photographs in a way that illustrated his growth. “This is the order not only is it sequentially when they happened, but I think this shows a progression of my knowledge of myself and the field, and what I wanted to do with it,” Anthony stated with enthusiasm. Furthermore, he elaborated on the notion of how he determined the order of photographs. “This is a photograph of how much I did not know…this is me gathering that information…this is me applying the information knowing about myself…and then knowing where I stood with others.”

Additionally, if none of the occurrences would have happened Anthony does not think he would have decided to pursue a master’s degree. Anthony explained, “If my family had not been the ones that were like you are going to law school then none of this would not happened. So, yes. If I had not gotten connected with NUFP…none of this would have happened.”

**Noelle.** Noelle described how she processed all of the photographs collectively as she gained knowledge, information, and facts about graduate school. Here are the photographs as she ranked them (Figure 4.41):

1. #EverythingThatIAm
2. #SissysDegree
3. #LimitlessInformation
4. #EliteExperience
5. #TheRoadLessTravled
As Noelle placed the photographs in her order preference, she explained the process of how she arranged the photographs. Although she placed her internship photograph as number four, she emphasized on the experience. “The difference between being director and the difference of being a partner at the program is your CPA. They’re in the same bracket, but of course pay scale is different,” Noelle explained, “but people get stuck at director because they didn’t take the time to get CPA.” This was a significant cause of Noelle wanting to pursue graduate school.

Noelle was unsure about whether she would still be in graduate school if none of the occurrences would have happened. “I feel like the only one that I can’t really count is blackness [#EverythingThatIAm photograph] because I was born black and I was born into the family that I was born into,” Noelle said, “I can’t say if I would’ve for sure I knew because of the family I was born into and as women whatever was required in me to excel. I was trying to do that’s what I would’ve been doing, so if that turned out to be a masters then that’s what I would’ve been doing.” Noelle expounded some more on the idea, “but I can’t say for sure. I don’t know for I would figure that out. I still have my interest I guess. But if my sister hadn’t gone, if I didn’t have google, if I hadn’t got that internship offer, it’s kind of like I would just be trying to get a job first you know.”

Noelle finished up to say, “If I never had internship, how would I know what to get my masters in. If I never had an experience in it, so I would just be trying to figure it out. So I don’t know for sure that it would be this master’s program, it would’ve been doing whatever that was beneficial for me.”
Joe. Joe described how he processed all of the photographs collectively as he gained knowledge, information, and facts about graduate school. Here are the photographs as he ranked them (Figure 4.41):

1. #Family
2. #LaptopExploring
3. #19thWarCommunity
4. #DollarBill
5. #Selfie

As Joe organized the photographs, he made it clear that his family was the foundation of his overall being, the central element that keeps him grounded as an individual. “I guess family is the foundation…but coming back to school like I said what my mom told me making this world a better place and giving back to the community,” Joe explained. He further expounded on his ordering of the photographs by stating, “coming back to your community I think that’s so important you know. You can’t leave and say I know I left my neighborhood as the hood. It’s many people of color leaving their community and not enough going back. That’s how you going to break that by going back.”

Also, if none of the occurrences would have happened for Joe that represented his five photographs he does not think he would have pursued a master’s degree. He provided details by stating, “I think about the photo of family. I think that some people do come to graduate school, but don’t have family support or don’t have family behind them 100%.” He continued to express the significance of his family by explaining, “I think that still plays a role in how successful you are in graduate school and how successful you are
in general. You know I have family where I can ask them for anything, or talk to them about anything. They’re always pushing me always.”

**Jessica.** Jessica described how she processed all of the photographs collectively as she gained knowledge, information, and facts about graduate school. Here are the photographs as she ranked them (Figure 4.41):

1. #WithoutStruggleTheresNotProgress
2. #MyMotivation
3. #MakeItYourOwn
4. #NoMoneyNoProblems
5. #OneDegreeTwoDegrees2Go

Jessica placed the photographs based on which memory had the greatest impact on her decision to be in a master’s program, with the first photograph representing the greatest impact and the last photograph representing the least impact. Jessica did not provide specifics of how each photograph affected her.

Moreover, if none of the occurrences would have happened for Jessica that represented her five photographs, she still believes that pursuing a master’s degree would still occur. However, she would not have been enthusiastic about it. Jessica explained, “Yeah, but I would not be as passionate about it.”

**Justin.** Justin described how he processed all of the photographs collectively as he gained knowledge, information, and facts about graduate school. Here are the photographs as he ranked them (Figure 4.41):

1. #LibraryBridge
Justin placed the photographs in a logical format of how the events occurred. The first photograph represented the connections he made with people, in particular the individuals that introduced him to graduate school. The next photograph represented how he grew professionally. Applied research symbolized the third photograph. The movement of making graduate school a reality came into place for the fourth photograph. Lastly, the website and emails represented seeking more information about the particular master’s program Justin was interested in pursuing.

Justin believed that if none of these occurrences had happened, he still would have pursued a master’s degree. “I kind of knew that I was going to do something like higher higher higher education, but I guess I went through all the stepping stones. That concept just augmented to more than just a mental construct, it was more something physically I could do now,” Justin explained.

Secondary Research Question One

This section presents results for the secondary research question one: What are the factors that led Black master’s students to pursue graduate school? To answer this research question, I utilized Charmaz’s (2009) four coding cycles of constructivist grounded theory in the study: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, (c) selective coding, and (d) theoretical coding. Five themes and two corresponding subthemes developed, and are
labeled as the Five Factors Matrix. A visual representation of the Five Factors Matrix and the summary of the descriptions are below. The visual representation in figure 4.42 on the following page.
## Visualization of the Five Factors Matrix

*(Figure 4.42)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor 1: MENTAL STIMULATIONS</th>
<th>Hermes</th>
<th>Charity</th>
<th>Danielle</th>
<th>Anthony</th>
<th>Noelle</th>
<th>Joe</th>
<th>Jessica</th>
<th>Justin</th>
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<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
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<td>#QualitativeMethods</td>
<td>#YeahYouAreABadAss</td>
<td>#WithoutStruggleThere'sNoProgress</td>
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<th>Anthony</th>
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<th>Joe</th>
<th>Jessica</th>
<th>Justin</th>
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<td>#TheLab</td>
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<td>#SissysDegree</td>
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<td>#NUFP</td>
<td>#MyMotivation</td>
<td>#TheMainOffice</td>
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<th>Noelle</th>
<th>Joe</th>
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<td>Purpose</td>
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<td>#The19thWarMyCommunity</td>
<td>#Family</td>
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<td>#PaperPlanes</td>
<td>#TheRoadLessTraveled</td>
<td>#Selfie</td>
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Mental Stimulation

For the theme Mental Stimulation, five photographs were placed underneath it. This theme was one of the first to emerge and it was during the axial coding stage (Charmaz, 2008). The participants that used mental stimulation as a way that they gained facts, information, and awareness about graduate school was different from all of the other participants. These participants seem to be socially reserved and considered themselves to be non-student leaders who enjoyed challenging dialogue and thought-provoking books.

Experiential Experiences

For the theme Experiential Experiences, four photographs were placed underneath it. This theme focused on how the participants observed other people going through the process of graduate school, which resulted in them wanting to the same. This theme also focused on internships that helped individuals to decide to pursue graduate school.

Community Support

A total of nine photographs were placed underneath the theme Community Support. This theme was one of the first to emerge, and it was during the axial coding stage (Charmaz, 2008). The theme served as an umbrella to some of the other themes. The need for support was salient among all of the participants in different forms. However, specific support systems that appeared in the data came from programs and associations, family members, and peers. These results led the individuals to ultimately pursue graduates school.

Life Strategies
A total of 16 photographs were placed underneath the theme Life Strategies. This theme focused on how the participants selected the institution that they wanted to attend, though it was not the purpose of this study. However, the subtheme Navigation brought a perspective of how individuals select the institutions that they want to attend based on the attractiveness of the institutions’ website, and the funding opportunities available to them. These results led the individuals to pursue graduate school.

**Identity Influences**

For the theme Identity Influences, six photographs were placed underneath it. This theme later emerged from Mental Stimulation. Participants that used identity influences as a way to gain facts, information, and awareness about graduate school mostly used stories that were told to them about their grandparents. These participants later recorded mental notes of how their grandparents acted and then desired to emulate them. These results led the individuals to pursue graduate school.

**Secondary Research Question Two**

This section presents results for the secondary research question two: What were the critical moments that led Black master’s students’ decisions to apply to graduate school? To answer this research question, the participants had to engage in the second part of the photo-map process activity by selecting the photograph that represented the tipping point in their decision to pursue a graduate degree.

As referred in Chapter 2, a critical moment is a conscious awareness that leads an individual to a “final choice” in the decision-making process. Furthermore, a critical moment is very similar to the tipping point, which is a moment when an “idea, trend, or
social behavior crosses a threshold, tips,” and then sets off in a new direction (Gladwell, 2006, p. 1).

The participants’ visual representations of their critical moments are circled below on the following page (Figure 4.43). Brief narratives related to the participants’ critical moments are discussed below as well.
Photo-maps Visualization and Critical Moments

(Figure 4.43)

1. Hermes
2. Charity
3. Danielle
4. Anthony
5. Noelle
6. Joe
7. Jessica
8. Justin
Hermes. Hermes’ critical moment photograph fitted underneath the theme Community Support and the subtheme Formal. His critical moment that led him to decide to apply for graduate school was his #PreparationAtItsBest photograph (Figure 4.10). He stated, “It was already decided by the time…but the tipping point I mean I just you would have to say the McNair program. Just because of how essential it was to get me out of there.” The photograph represented the tools needed to pursue graduate school. Therefore, unlike many other participants, Hermes was equipped for graduate school because of McNair program.

Therefore, Hermes’s critical moment was based on being “equipped” for graduate school. The program made it easier for Hermes to choose to pursue graduate school because he did not go through the process alone. Hermes had assistance from seeking out graduate schools, to writing personal statements, and to GRE preparation assistance. Hermes ultimate advantage is that he knew how to navigate the process, unlike the other participants.

Charity. Charity’s critical moment photograph fitted underneath the theme Mental Stimulation and the subtheme Materials. For Charity, the critical moment that led her to pursue graduate school was based on her photograph #GrandfathersThesis (Figure 4.3). “Probably the gravitas of the first one. Of the...my grandparents. Yeah once I started thinking about it [graduate school], you know, we talked about it again over and over. And they said well you know your grandparents did this blah blah blah. And I think that's part of what helped make it okay and what makes me like. It kind of keeps me going.
Generations of my family have done this. I can also do this. So yeah I think that one has the most disequilibrium,” Charity explained.

Charity’s narrative described how her critical moment consisted of maintaining the utility of the family trajectory. Since her grandparents were high achieving individuals, her assumptions were that she had to follow their example. Pursuing graduate school was implicitly expected of Charity. Over Charity’s life, it was apparent that her grandparents deposited seeds in her mind that graduate school was the common educational route that people took. Since Charity assumed it was common, overtime she became more and more interested in receiving her graduate degree.

Danielle. Danielle’s critical moment photograph fitted underneath the theme Life Strategies and the subtheme Funding. Due to job-hopping and having a lack of money, Danielle felt that her critical moment about deciding to apply to graduate school revolved around the lowest point in her life. Danielle explained, “No job, no money, now what? That was the most deciding factor. Because you gotta support yourself.”

Danielle’s description of what tipped her over the edge to decide to apply for graduate school was due to escaping her financial burdens and trying to find financial stability. Unlike Hermes’ critical moment that centers on being equipped for graduate school and Charity’s critical moment of being expected to assume the role of her family, Danielle’s critical moment dealt with financial reasons. Her goal for making the final decision to apply to graduate resulted on wanting to be financially stable long-term.

Anthony. Anthony’s critical moment fitted underneath the theme Community Support and the subtheme Formal. Similar to Hermes’ critical moment, Anthony’s
critical moment focused on his #NUFP photograph (Figure 4.11). “The NUFP picture, this picture was at NASPA the one in New Orleans. We were all still seniors we were all still figuring what grad school meant without actually being in grad school,” Anthony stated.

The #NUFP photograph represented how Anthony came to understand graduate school and what it entailed. Also, the photograph represented how Anthony learned about the graduate program that he was interested in. Therefore, his critical moment took place at the conclusion of the conference. He was sold on the idea of applying to graduate school for Student Affairs.

Joe. Joe’s critical moment fitted underneath the theme Identity Influences and the subtheme Purpose. When asked about the tipping point that led him to decide to apply for graduate school, Joe clearly placed emphasis on his photograph #The19thWarMyCommunity (Figure 4.36). “My community the 19th war, and I love my community it is such a great place with so much life and cultural and it still has a future I think and so much potential to research again and to be a place to be in a better place that I remember as a kid,” Joe mentioned.

Therefore, what encouraged Joe to apply for graduate school was not only his community but also about the opportunity of giving back to others. He assumed if he worked hard, that he could be in a financially stable place to be a servant to people. Furthermore, Joe’s ultimate goal is to be in a position where he could influence other young individuals to reach their optimal potential in life.
**Noelle.** Noelle’s critical moment fitted underneath the theme Experiential Experiences and the subtheme Close-up. Conflicted with taking a job offer versus getting a master’s degree encapsulated Noelle’s critical moment about pursuing graduate school. “Definitely the letter the offer letter,” as Noelle explained the photograph (Figure 4.6). Because I had to decide over the course of the internship…but the timing of that offer and what it says depends on whether you’re going to grad school … so I had to decide if I wanted to stay with that company or if I was going to grad school.”

Noelle’s critical moment about deciding to apply for graduate school came out of a positive conflict. Noelle debated on whether or not she should take the job position or finish school with a graduate degree. Ultimately, Noelle valued the concept of applying for graduate school more. By having a choice to obtain a dual-degree in five-years made it easier for Noelle to decide to apply for graduate school.

**Jessica.** Jessica’s critical moment fitted underneath the theme Mental Stimulation and the subtheme Materials. The critical moment that made Jessica decide to pursue graduate school is after her reflection from reading the book about gender inequalities in education and the achievement gap among White and Black students (Figure 4.4). “The second [photograph] that was like an eye-opening,” Jessica expressed with sadness as she looked down. “I don’t know I just read that sentence over. I was like are you kidding me like I can go to school have triple debt be out here struggling just in all my identities.”

Although Jessica labeled this as a negative experience, she strongly felt that she could help to dismantle systemic racism by pursuing a graduate degree. The information
that she learned about gender inequalities and the achievement gap encouraged her to take on this social responsibility for Black students.

**Justin.** Justin’s critical moment fitted underneath the theme Community Support and the subtheme Informal, which was the support in the main office of his academic building (Figure 4.18). He stated, “I guess the main office was more the precipice before I jumped into grad school right, so I consider that as the tipping point because it was like the final thing I had to do, like in my heart.” Justin went further to say, “I had to prove myself it was like take all those classes, make sure my GPA was straight, everything was straight my credits were right. So that was like the real challenge in getting into grad school, everything had kind of gotten me up to do it and being in the main office kind of just like force me to push myself and get into grad school.”

For Justin, his critical moment dealt with proving to himself that he could get into graduate school. He sought out the pursuit of graduate school like another challenge where he had to get over the hurdle. Justin had an internal expectation for himself that he wanted to see himself achieve.

**The Five Factors: A Theoretical Model**

The findings that emerged from Charmaz’s (2008) data analysis procedure delivered the basis for the development of a theoretical model that explains the role of the Five Factors. Key constructs of the model include the two primary factors of how students gained information, facts, and awareness about graduate school that emerged from the data: (a) Mental Stimulation and (b) Community Support. These two factors
represented how the majority of the participants made their decision to pursue graduate school. The other three constructs are represented as the secondary factors.

The title of the theoretical model presented the Five Factors Model. The model is presented in figure 4.44 on the following page.
The Five Factors Model

(Figure 4.44)

Drivers
- Faculty/Staff
- Discoveries
- Institution
- Personality
- Programs
- Family
- Institution
- Personality

KEY FACTORS
MENTAL STIMULATION

SECONDARY FACTORS +/-
- EXPERIENTIAL EXPERIENCES
- LIFE STRATEGIES
- IDENTITY INFLUENCES

PREDISPOSITION PHASE

CRITICAL MOMENT
As illustrated in Figure 4.44, this research study focused on the predisposition phase as it related to the Black master’s students. In this phase, students develop a desire to attend college without focusing on which particular institution to attend. The two key constructs demonstrated in the Five Factors Model are Mental Stimulation and Community Support that developed out of the predisposition phase. Participants articulated Mental Stimulation and Community Support as factors of how they gained facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. At the stage of axial coding (Charmaz, 2008), the need to be stimulated mentally and to have support, in general, was salient throughout the data analysis process. Identity Influences stemmed from Mental Stimulation in the selective coding stage. The remaining two factors, Experiential Experiences and Life Strategies, linked heavily with Community Support. These two factors, Experiential Experiences and Life Strategies, was disintegrated from the theme at the stage of selective coding (Charmaz, 2008). The Life Strategies theme was not selected as a major construct because of the nature of the responses.

As depicted in the Five Factors Model, Mental Stimulation was driven by categories classified in the drivers’ column. The categories consisted of personality, institution, discoveries, and faculty/staff. Participants that used mental stimulation as a way to gather facts, information, and awareness about graduate school were mostly non-student leaders. Non-student leaders is defined as students not being involved in leadership extracurricular activities on campus (Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). The study participant personal information form (see Appendix E) asked whether participants were
student leaders. Furthermore, the non-student leaders, based on observation, seemed socially reserved. These observations were frequently documented for these participants.

The arrow in the Five Factors Model linking the drivers’ column to the Mental Stimulation box indicate that these categories influenced mental stimulation for the participants. The participants described differences of influences that made them produce mental stimulation. The institution, where they were located at during their undergraduate years, influenced many of the participants. Being on a HBCU campus versus a PWI campus played a role in how the participants gained facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. For example, the students that participated at a HBCU made statements that indicated that they were more mentally challenged at their respective undergraduate institutions by their faculty and staff. These students were mentally challenged, and they enjoyed making self-discoveries about themselves and the world around them. As being non-student leaders and socially reserved, these participants enjoyed reading literature. Through literature, they unconsciously identified research problems that encouraged their interests to pursue graduate school.

The other major construct in the Five Factors Model is Community Support and is depicted in the bottom section. Students’ personalities, institutions, families, and programs all influenced Community Support. All of these occurrences happened in the predisposition phase. Participants that stated how Community Support played a significant factor in gathering facts, information, and awareness about graduate school were typically student leaders. Furthermore, the student leaders, based on observation, seemed to be very socially engaged during the photo-elicitation interviews. These
individuals seemed as though they needed more discussion of the idea of pursuing graduate school to their support systems versus the participants that needed to be mentally challenged. These observations were frequently documented for these participants.

The arrow in the Five Factors Model linking the drivers’ column to the Community Support box indicate these drivers influenced the community support for the participants. Many of the participants received support from their institution and families. These participants needed support from these categories to make them think more about pursuing graduate school. For example, many of the participants relied on support from their institution in the form of mentors and resources. Furthermore, the same participants heavily relied on encouraging words from their families to pursue graduate school. The participants also indicated how programs that assist underrepresented students to get into graduate school played a significant role in them applying. The students who participated at a PWI institution seemed to have better support resources in the form of programs to help them get into graduate school. All of the participants that were in programs and associations that assisted them getting into graduate school came from PWIs. Lastly, the individuals that needed more Community Support relied on external motivation, and the individuals that needed more Mental Stimulation relied on internal motivation to pursue graduate school.

The inclusion of key constructs in the Five Factors Model indicates that Mental Stimulation and Community Support were the most influential factors, among others. Secondary factors of how students gained information, facts, and awareness about
graduate school included: (a) Experiential Experiences, (b) Life Strategies, and (c) Identity Influences. All of the participants gave credit to one or more of the secondary factors of how they gained information, facts, and awareness about graduate school. One participant cited Experiential Experiences as to leading to their critical moment or final decision about pursuing graduate school. Another participant cited Life Strategies as to leading to their critical moment. Additionally, only one participant cited Identity Influences leading to their critical moment. The remainder of participants selected either Mental Stimulation or Community Support leading to their critical moment. The arrow in the center of the model pointing to the other secondary factors indicate that they exert some influences in how the participants made final decisions to pursue graduate school as well. All of the Five Factors lead the participants to their critical moment.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Introduction

This study utilized a constructivist grounded theory methodology and an emergent, participant-generated visual method called photo-elicitation to examine how Black master’s students processed facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. The objective was to determine the processes Black master’s students followed when they decided to attend graduate school. To accomplish this objective, I examined the main factors that led Black students to pursue graduate school and the critical moments that influenced their ultimate decisions to apply. Chapter Five offers an exhaustive discussion of the study and overview on the (a) research findings, (b) discussion of the findings, (c) implications for practical applications, and (d) recommendations for future research. The purpose of the final chapter is to provide an overall summary and conclusion to the research study.

Summary of the Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine how Black master’s students process knowledge about pursuing graduate school. The study was grounded in the social constructivist epistemology (Crotty, 2003) and answered three research questions. The overarching research question for this study was as follows: How do Black master’s students process knowledge about deciding to pursue graduate school? Secondary research questions included the following: (1) What factors led Black master’s students to
apply to graduate school? (2) What were the critical moments that influenced Black master’s students’ decisions to apply to graduate school?

Rooted in the social constructivist epistemology (Rizer & Goodman, 2004), I engaged participants in photo-elicitation interviews to explain how individuals processed knowledge about graduate school. The participants were required to take five photographs and write out captions in the form of hashtags to describe how they gathered facts, information, and awareness that made them pursue graduate school education. The second part of the photo-elicitation interview was the photo-map activity. The participants had to create a photo-map of their five photographs and had to place the photographs in order of significance. The participants then had to describe how the photographs built upon one another through the process of pursuing graduate school education.

Photo-elicitation was the selected method for the study because it evokes deeper elements of human consciousness than do words alone to describe complex realities (Harper, 2002), such as understanding a process. Scholars of visual methods have argued that visual artifacts in a study may offer a different perspective of how individuals process information more than a traditional method (Collier, 1957; Harper, 2002; Rose, 2012). Additionally, scholars of visual methods have argued that photo-elicitation is appropriate for participants to engage in self-reflection (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004).

The university site for the study was a predominately White institution (PWI) situated in the Southeast of the United States. The university site was selected due to accessibility, resources provided, and sample availability. Eight participants volunteered
for the study and met the following criterion: (1) self-identified as Black and/or African American, and were (2) currently enrolled as a full-time master’s level student. The conceptual framework in Chapter One served as a guide to analyze study findings (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The conceptual framework offered a lens to how the data was coded.

Data generation mechanisms were utilized to produce triangulation in examining how the Black master’s students process knowledge about pursuing graduate school education. The data generation mechanisms were critical because of the equalized power differentials concerning the participants and myself as the researcher (Harper, 2002; Rose, 2012). These data generation mechanisms included demographic information elicited from the participants, materials from the photo-elicitation interviews, captions of the pictures presented in the form of hashtags, and interpretations that were made from the photo-map activities. Additional ways that data generation was utilized was by having a field notes instrument, a personal journal to record concluding thoughts after each interview, and providing a subjectivity statement that disclosed my personal stance.

Then, throughout the coding process of the data, Charmaz’s (2008) constructivist grounded theory approach was utilized to analyze transcriptions, photographs, hashtags, and the interpretations from the photo-map activities. The constructivist grounded theory approach consisted of four cycles of coding: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, (c) selective coding, and (d) theoretical coding. During this coding phase, common words and phrases were identified within and across transcriptions. Constructivist grounded theory was selected because of the focus it has on understanding a process (Harrison &
Lawrence, 2004) and the new development of theory that it brings. Through the coding procedure, overarching themes emerged to answer the research questions.

To assist with validity and trustworthiness, I utilized two preventative measures that consisted of enlisting a critical friend to critique my coding schema (Gordon, 2006; Lunenberg & Samaras, 2011) and engaging in member checking to verify the accuracy of my findings (Patton, 2002). Additionally, my subjectivity statement provided transparency and alleviated assumptions and bias as the researcher. My personal journal and field notes instrument were employed to uncover my concluding thoughts after each photo-elicitation interview. Information was documented immediately to prevent me from losing vital information that could go towards my findings.

**Discussion of the Findings**

This study responds to repeated calls for research about how Black master’s students process facts, information, and awareness about graduate school (Ethington & Smart, 1986; Gray, 2013; McCallum, 2015). This study also contributes to the literature about what factors led Black students to decide to apply for graduate school by providing an empirical investigation.

Furthermore, while there have been previous studies about recruiting Black students into master’s and/or doctoral programs (Gray, 2013; Griffin & Muniz, 2011; Johnson, 2015; Strayhorn, 2005; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013), and studies about the decision-making process for Black graduate students based on college choice (Collins, 2005; Hunter, 2006; McCallum, 2015; Smith, 2006), this study was purposeful to examine how those students decided to pursue graduate school.
Equally fundamental, this study contributes to the literature on the utilization of photo-elicitation interviews to produce findings of factors that led the students to pursue graduate school. Additionally, the photo-elicitation interviews examined the critical moments that influenced the participants to apply for graduate school. Finally, this study delivers a model by offering evidence to illustrate how Black students are influenced to pursue graduate school education due to five factors.

**Five Factors**

Below is a discussion of how the findings from this research study compares to the literature review that was presented in Chapter Two.

**Mental Stimulations.**

Findings that included data from participants’ demographic information, photo-elicitation interviews, photo-map activities, and the researcher’s field notes demonstrated that Black students need prior Mental Stimulation to think about the pursuit of graduate school. These students need intentional dialogue to engage them and literature where they can identify research problems. For example, these students needed to be challenged with a research problem to solve in order to consider pursuing graduate school.

Contradictory to the literature review of this dissertation, there is no known study to indicate the importance of Mental Stimulation for Black students to pursue graduate school. The need for Mental Stimulation is a discovery that is non-existent in the body of literature and served as one of the key factors in this dissertation study.

**Experiential Experiences.**
Findings from this study also demonstrated that Black students make decisions to pursue a master’s degree due to Experiential Experiences. These experiences are critical because they provide students with a glimpse of what the students would be doing in graduate school. Astin’s theory of involvement (Astin, 1993) and Tinto’s theory of student departure (1975, 1987, 1993) are consistent with the findings of this dissertation study. Astin’s theory of involvement posits that students learn by becoming involved (Astin, 1993). For example, faculty/student relationships can influence students positively if a student is involved in their professor's research while learning from the professor (Guiffrida, 2005). This may result in persistence and for the student to pursue more education beyond their baccalaureate degree.

In a similar way, Tinto's model of undergraduate student persistence theorized that the degree of social and academic integration experienced by students influences persistence toward graduation (Tinto, 1975; Ethington & Smart, 1986). This notion also led Tinto to consider the educational environment factors that may encourage students to pursue more education. As articulated in Chapter Two, attending racial workshops, engaging in research projects, and interacting with faculty are all factors that seem to influence educational aspirations (Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman, 2002; Tinto, 1993). These activities are all forms of experiential learning referred to in Tinto’s model (1975, 1997, 1993). Data generated from this study were consistent with research findings from Tinto’s model (1993). This study found that working with professors and graduate students during a student’s undergraduate years has a strong affect on students wanting to pursue a master’s degree.
Community Support.

Findings from this research study described how formal and informal support systems could be one of the deciding factors of why Black students pursue a master's degree. As McCallum (2015) noted, family members play an important role in the decision-making process of Black graduate students pursuing graduate degrees. Similarly, findings from this dissertation study illustrated the same notion that pressure and encouragement stemmed from the participants’ families. Participants disclosed that if it had not been for their families, pursuing a master’s degree would not be possible.

Contrary to the literature review findings, the findings for this dissertation showed that Black students need programs and organizations to consider graduate school. There was a lot of emphasis placed on preparation programs, which helped students to prepare for standardized tests, write personal statements, expose them to other underrepresented graduate students, allow the students to work with faculty on their research, and more.

Life Strategies.

Findings from this study described how Black master's students utilized strategies to seek information and also explained how funding played a significant role in deciding to pursue a master’s degree. As Hunter (2006) noted in the literature review, a factor in determining how Black students are influenced on pursuing more education can stem from "marketing” factors. Furthermore, those students have to be sold on the idea that graduate school is one of the greatest benefits for them.

The findings underneath the theme Life Strategies are consistent with the dissertation research findings; that an institution's website should be very appealing and
organized in a way that encourages students to want to seek more information.

Essentially, prospective Black master’s students have to think that pursuing a graduate education is attractive, from the marketing and funding standpoints.

**Identity Influences.**

Finally, findings from this study also examined how Black master’s students’ identities played a role in them wanting to pursue a graduate degree. McCallum’s (2015) findings indicate how family members play an important role in the decision-making process of Black graduate students pursuing graduate degrees, and in this dissertation study, most of the participants developed their identities from their families. Participants developed similar characteristic traits from their grandparents, which resulted in them finding a purpose in life. The participants wanted to fulfill what their grandparents had originally started. Furthermore, this dissertation’s findings align strongly with McCallum's (2015), which stated that family members had graduate school expectations for their student and the student was motivated through narratives of oppression.

**Implications for Practical Applications**

This research study has implications for administrators, policymakers, faculty in higher education, and for other individuals responsible for the recruitment and enrollment of Black students in graduate school. A vital point for individuals working with Black students is “that most undergraduate students have a poor understanding of graduate education and often will not consider graduate school as a strategic educational option after completing their baccalaureate degree program” (Gray, 2013, p. 29). The empirical findings unpacked some specific moments where Black students started unconsciously
thinking about the idea of graduate school. Nuances that emerged from the findings suggested that individuals receive and compartmentalize messages about pursuing graduate education in similar and yet different ways.

Identifying research problems while being an undergraduate student provides an implication for practice. Casap (2017) urges educators of K-12 students in stating, “Don’t ask kids what they want to be when they grow up but what problems they want to solve.” Higher education faculty/staff such as advisors, should take this approach and use it for Black undergraduate students. Using this approach will target mental stimulation for these students to discover the research problems that may want to help solve. Asking intentional questions such as these may introduce and encourage Black students to participate in research. This dissertation study provided evidence to show that if Black students are exposed to research problems, this may serve as a critical moment to encourage students to pursue graduate education.

Black undergraduate students need a plethora of opportunities to engage in Experiential Experiences. These opportunities include working with faculty, collaborating with graduate students in regards to their research, and to receiving more job training through co-ops or internships. All of these opportunities will allow Black undergraduate students to make sound decisions as to whether or not pursuing a master's degree is the right choice. Essentially, these opportunities represent exposure for the students.

Also, providing avenues for increased program support for Black students to get into graduate school provides an implication for practice. Scholars previously mentioned
in the literature review of this study have argued students have consistently lacked the necessary support (Allen, 1992; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Strayhorn, 2005; Thomas, 1981; Warren, 1954). Furthermore, Johnson-Bailey (2007) stated that the major issues that have affected recruitment of Black graduate students had been the lack of accessibility. Findings from this study have indicated that accessibility to pipeline programs are very effective in getting Black students to decide to pursue graduate education. Programs geared toward introducing Black undergraduates to graduate school should be considered at all colleges and universities. Also, findings from this study indicate that all colleges and universities should tap into their Black undergraduate student population and try to retain them through a pipeline program. Such pipeline programs should be made available to Black students at the conclusion of their second year in school. By having the pipeline program available to Black students at the end of their second year in college would be the ideal time to introduce students to the program, since the students should be adjusted to college. Also, this time period gives administrators a sense of if the students are ideal candidates for graduate school based on their grades and prior experiences.

The practical implications for strategies for schools in secondary education to make research attractive to the youth. Libraries could carry theses and dissertations for the youth to read or review. The material should be presented in an attracting and engaging manner for students to be encouraged to learn and read about research. By students in secondary education, learning about research could expose them to the concept of graduate school.
The practical implications for strategies for colleges and universities to frequently keep their information up-to-date on their websites and make sure that it is attractive for the millennial student. Findings from this study indicated that Black students made their institution selection based on the attractiveness of their institution’s website and accessibility. Hunter (2006) concurred that marketing factors strongly influence Black students to make their decision in regards to an institution. An easy marketing strategy would be to have anecdotal stories on graduate programs’ websites to give prospective students an insight into graduate school life. Furthermore, marketing funding opportunities are a need for Black students and this information should be readily available for these students on the websites.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The overarching goal of this study was to examine how Black master’s students process knowledge in regards to pursuing graduate education. Although this research study contributes to the body of literature to the field, it is not exempt from containing any limitations. First, the most common limitation for most qualitative studies, including this study, concentrated on sampling. The response rate for the number of students eligible to participate in this study was 11%. A total of 8 individuals responded out of 75 full-time Black master’s students. Given that it was a small sampling size and data was retrieved from a predominately White institution, the findings cannot be generalizable to other institutional settings (Patton, 2002), such as historical Black institutions and colleges (HBCUs) and any other non-predominately white institutions (PWI). Future studies could broaden the scope of this study by gathering Black master’s students at
other institution types. Additional suggestions to researchers that would like to further this study would be for them to study Black master’s students by major, gender, and enrollment status. This possibly could provide variability of the findings.

Second, my role as Black graduate student may have confused the boundaries of perceptions because of personal relationships I had with four of the participants. Questions on the field notes instrument should have addressed this concern at the conclusion of every interview. Information should have been documented indicating if participants were more implicit or explicit based on the relationship I had with them. Future studies should have a field note instrument to address these concerns, such as personal relationships with the participants and how the relationships may have affected the data retrieved from the participants.

Third, the photo-elicitation interview protocol that I provided to the participants formed a limitation. Surfaced from the interviews came a myriad of emotions for the participants. Intentional questions such as, "How did taking the photographs make you feel?" should have been addressed. This question would have been consistent with the underpinning of the study by addressing the reflections of the participants. Participants did not have the opportunity to share their reflections of the photographs that they captured. Future researchers that use photo-elicitation interviews should allow their participants to reflect on how taking the photographs for the interview makes them feel.

Beyond limitations, findings from the dissertation raised other questions that researchers could examine in future studies. For example, findings indicated that the participants interpreted information in similar and yet different ways. This finding can
indicate that learning styles can play a significant role of how the participants gained facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. Mental Stimulation may connect with the learning styles of auditory and reading. In addition, Identity Influences may connect with the learning styles of social. Every participant had a critical moment where they were receptive to the idea of graduate school, and this can be linked back to learning styles. Studies that aim to build upon this dissertation study could also examine how learning styles take account of how Black students process information about graduate school. These discoveries can be produced and implemented throughout K-postsecondary education.

Findings from the study also suggested that Community Support in the form of organizations and programs was one of the most effective ways in getting Black students to consider graduate school. The phase of the educational pipeline that focuses on the transition of undergraduate students to graduate students should be evaluated to better serve underrepresented students in support programs. Future research studies could examine the effectiveness of these programs, which sole purpose is to increase the number of underrepresented students into graduate school.

**Chapter Summary and Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to situate the findings from this study with results from previous studies on Black graduate students. This concluding chapter started with a summary of research findings, and the next section consisted of the discussion of the findings. The following sections included implications for practical application and recommendations for future research.
To conclude, the findings from this research study contributed to the work of scholars of Black graduate students and decision-making process theories. More in depth, findings from this study expanded scholars to understanding how Black students’ process information in deciding to pursue graduate school. Findings further demonstrated that the concept of graduate school for most students started transpiring at a young age, though their final decision to attend did not take place until later years. Findings also revealed how underrepresented programs that increase the number of Black students into graduate school are effective, though many students are not aware or have access to these programs.

The findings of this study have implications for practical applications towards administrators and policymakers in higher education that recruit and attract Black students into graduate school. Additionally, there are implications for researchers that utilize photo-elicitation in their research studies and other emergent methods. Findings address repeated calls for Black master's students’ to offer literature towards understanding how the process works for Black students to enroll in graduate school. Finally, the study findings have practical implications for individuals who hold leadership positions as administrators and who are responsible for the development and matriculation of prospective Black master’s students.
Appendix A

Clemson University

Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation:
A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach

IRB Exempt Research Approval

Dear Dr. Cawthon,

The Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed the protocol referenced above using exempt review procedures and a determination was made on October 21, 2016 that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as Exempt under category B2 in accordance with federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101. Your protocol will expire on June 31, 2017.

The expiration date indicated above was based on the completion date you entered on the IRB application. If an extension is necessary, the PI should submit an Exempt Protocol Extension Request form, http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/forms.html, at least three weeks before the expiration date. Please refer to our website for more information on the extension procedures, http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/guidance/reviewprocess.html.

All team members are required to review the IRB policies "Responsibilities of Principal Investigators" and "Responsibilities of Research Team Members" available at http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/regulations.html.

No change in this research protocol can be initiated without the IRB’s approval. This includes any proposed revisions or amendments to the protocol or informed consent form(s). Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects, complications, and/or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Research Compliance immediately.

The Clemson University IRB is committed to facilitating ethical research and protecting the rights of human subjects. Please contact us if you have any questions and use the IRB number and title when referencing the study in future correspondence.

I wish you the best with your study.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth

B. Elizabeth Chapman, MA, CACII
IRB Coordinator
Clemson University
Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Clemson Centre
391 College Avenue
Suite 406
Clemson, SC 29631
Voice: (864) 656-6460
E-mail: bfeltha@clemson.edu
Web site: http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/
Appendix B
Clemson University

Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation: A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach

Invitation to Participate in Study Email Script

Dear Graduate Students:

You are invited to participate in a research study that uses photography to examine factors that lead selected graduate students to pursue a Master’s degree. The research question for the study asks: How do Black master’s students process knowledge about going to graduate school?

The specifics about the role of participants and eligibility requirements are listed below.

If you qualify for and would like to participate in this study, or if you have questions, please contact Co-Investigator, Ms. Ashley L. Isreal at aisreal@g.clemson.edu or (843) 621-4254.

Role of Participants in the Study:
- Participants will use their own smartphones or digital camera to take 5 photographs that describe how they collected facts, information, and awareness about deciding to pursue graduate school. Participants will then write one word or phrase hashtags about each photograph.
- Participants will have 5 days to take 5 photographs and email them to the co-investigator at GraduateStudents@gmail.com.
- If you do not have a camera, one will be provided for you.
- After 5 days, participants will give all photographs and hashtags to the researcher as artifacts of how they gathered knowledge about pursuing a Master’s degree.
- Upon submitting photographs and hashtags, participants will be invited to participate in a 30-minute to one-hour face-to-face interview with the co-investigator.

Eligibility Requirements:
- Participants must self-identify as African American and/or Black.
- Participants must be enrolled full-time in any Master’s degree seeking program at Clemson University.
- Participants must be willing to take photographs and write hashtags related to the factors that led them to graduate school and participate in a 30-minute to one-hour interview.
If you qualify for and would like to participate in this study, or if you have questions, please contact the Co-Investigator, Ashley L. Isreal at aisreal@g.clemson.edu or (843) 621-4254. Results from this study may provide useful information to administrators and student personnel that support graduate students through recruitment initiatives to increase the number of African Americans in graduate school.

Sincerely,

Ashley L. Isreal  
Deputy Chief of Staff, Graduate Student Government  
PhD Candidate in Educational Leadership  
Clemson University  
Co-Investigator  
aisreal@g.clemson.edu

Tony W. Cawthon, PhD  
Alumni Distinguished Professor of Education  
Professor of Student Affairs and  
Higher Education  
Clemson University  
Principal Investigator  
cawthot@clemson.edu
Appendix C

Clemson University

Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation: A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach

Faculty and Staff Email Script

Dear [insert faculty of staff’s member name]:

I need your assistance in forwarding the attached official invitation to your students. My goal is to gather participants in a dissertation research study that uses photography to elicit how Master students process facts, information, and awareness about deciding to pursue graduate school. The primary research question for this study asks: How do Black master’s students process knowledge about going to graduate school?

Participants in the study must be enrolled as a Master’s degree seeking student and can be in any discipline. Participants must self-identify as African American and/or Black. Participants must be engaged in full-time study. Attached is an official invitation for students to participate, which interested students may complete and send to me via email at GraduateStudents@gmail.com. Please circulate the attached document among your advisees and other Master level students enrolled in your courses.

The role of the participants in this research study will be to use their own smartphone or digital camera to take 5 photographs that describe how they gathered facts, information, and awareness that made them pursue graduate school. Participants will have 5 days to take the 5 photographs and to write a one word or phrase hashtag for each photo. After 5 days, participants will provide all photographs and hashtags to the co-investigator as artifacts of how they collected facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. Upon submitting their photographs and hashtags, participants will be invited to participate in a 30-minute to one-hour face-to-face interview session with the co-investigator. The interviews will be conducted during Fall 2016.

Thank you for your assistance in forwarding the attached official invitation letter to your students and advisees for this dissertation research study. I will be communicating with you in the next couple of weeks to see if any student(s) may be interested in participating in the research study. Those currently involved in the project may have the potential to be a major contributor for administrators and student personnel that support African American graduate students through recruitment initiatives. The overall goal is to find factors that may increase the number of African Americans in graduate school.

Sincerely,
Ashley Isreal
Deputy Chief of Staff, Graduate Student Government
PhD Candidate in Educational Leadership
Clemson University
Co-Investigator
aisreal@g.clemson.edu

Tony W. Cawthon, PhD
Alumni Distinguished Professor of Education
Professor of Student Affairs and Higher Education
Clemson University
Principle Investigator
cawthot@clemson.edu
Appendix D

Clemson University

Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation:  
A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach

Study Participant Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study conducted during the Fall 2016 semester by Tony Cawthon, PhD (Principal Investigator) and Ashley L. Isreal (Co-Investigator). Dr. Tony Cawthon is a faculty member at Clemson University. Ms. Isreal is a doctoral candidate at Clemson University and is administering this study under the direct supervision of Dr. Cawthon.

The purpose of this research study is to examine factors that lead graduate students who self-identify as African American to pursue a Master’s degree. This study utilizes photography to elicit reflection and discussion during interview sessions. The overall goal regarding this study is for the researcher to gain theoretical and practical knowledge in discovering mechanisms to increase the number of students of color in graduate school.

Your part in this study includes using your smartphone or your own digital camera to take 5 photographs that describe how you gathered facts, information, and awareness that made you pursue graduate school. You will have 5 days to take the 5 photographs and to write a one word or phrase hashtag for each photo. After 5 days, you will provide all photographs and hashtags to the researcher as artifacts of how you collected facts, information, and awareness about graduate school. Upon submitting your photographs and hashtags, you are invited to participate in a 30-minute to one-hour face-to-face interview session with the co-investigator. The interviews will be conducted during Fall 2016. The photographs and hashtags should be submitted to the co-investigator, Ashley L. Isreal, via email at GraduateStudents@gmail.com.

To prepare for the interview, the co-investigator asks that you bring your 5 photographs and hashtags to the interview session that most represent the knowledge you gained through facts, information, and awareness that made you pursue a graduate degree.

During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions about the photographs you captured. You will be asked to create a photomap of the flow of activities, interactions, and emotions that led you in pursuing more education at the graduate level. With your permission, interviews will be recorded for later transcription.

An important note to address is that we recommend that you take photos in public locations at which, oral permission from those individuals that you take a picture of will
suffice for this study. You will only need individuals to sign the non-study participant photograph release form, if there is an expectation of privacy (home, residence hall, faculty’s office, restroom, etc.) and the individuals agree to you taking their photographs. If minor’s photos are taken in a private location, you will need parent or guardian permission for those under 18, no minor permission is needed. Provided is a non-study participants release form for individuals at least 18 years of age and a form for individuals less than 18 years of age. If applicable, please return the signed form(s) at your interview. Additionally, please return your signed study participant photograph ownership release form during the interview. All of the forms will be collected before your interview begins.

**Risks and Discomforts**
There are no unforeseen risks or discomforts that you might expect if you take part in this research study. If you feel uncomfortable disclosing information on a given topic, please be aware that you can share at your discretion. You may discontinue participation at any given time if you feel uncomfortable disclosing topics to the co-investigator.

**Possible Benefits**
This research study aims to examine factors that lead graduate students who self-identify as African Americans to pursue a Master’s degree. Results from this study may provide useful information to administrators and student personnel that support graduate students through recruitment initiatives that intends to increase the number of African Americans in graduate school.

As a participant in this research study, please consider that your perspective is critical because it will provide insight on the deciding factors that African Americans make to advance their education. Your reflections will contribute to the literature that currently does not include how African Americans process information regarding graduate education, and how that information determines the deciding factors in pursuing graduate studies.

**Incentives**
The co-investigator will provide to you a $15 electronic Starbuck’s gift card at the conclusion of the study. You will be emailed the gift card after all of the following materials are completed and returned: (1) study participant personal information form, (2) non-study participant photograph release form(s), (if applicable) (3) study participant public photograph release form, and (4) member check form.

**Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality**
We will do all that we can to secure your identity concerning this research study. You will be provided with an alias, which you may create, and we will remove all recognizable data during our data analysis. However, if you choose to submit pictures of yourself, someone who sees the results of the study via publications or presentations may recognize you. The transcriptions from the audio recordings will be saved in the co-
The investigator’s password protected Gmail account and Google Drive which are used only for this research study. The audio recordings will be destroyed after transcriptions approximately 5 months after collecting them. The photographs taken during this study will be saved in the co-investigator’s password protected Gmail account and Google Drive.

**Choosing to Be in the Study**
Please be mindful that this is an entirely voluntary research study. You can decline the offer to participate or cease taking part in this research study at any given moment. You will not be penalized for not choosing to be in the study. You have the permission to ask for all of the information collected on you to be destroyed. The co-investigator has the authority to cease your participation in the research study if you do adhere to the guidelines set by the co-investigator.

**Contact Information.**
If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Dr. Tony Cawthon (Principal Investigator) at cawthot@clemson.edu. You may also contact Ms. Ashley L. Isreal (Co-Investigator) at aisreal@clemson or GraduateStudents@gmail.com.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-0636 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC’s toll-free number, 866-297-3071.

**You may print a copy of this informational letter for your files.**
Appendix E
Clemson University

Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation: A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach

Study Participant Personal Information Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full Name</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email Address</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailing Address</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone Number</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write “Yes” or “No” to Receive Reminder Text Messages concerning the Study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write “Yes” or “No” if you would like to Receive the Final Results of the Study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you a Student Leader? If yes, write in the Organizations that you are Involved in on Campus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please List your Undergrad Institution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1st year graduate student, 2nd year graduate student, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated Graduation Date</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Select an alias

(This name will be used to protect your true identity during the study and helps serve for organization purposes)
Appendix F

Clemson University

Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation: A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach

Study Participant Photograph Ownership Release Form

I, ________________________________ give permission for Tony Cawthon, PhD (Principal Investigator) and Ms. Ashley L. Isreal (Co-Investigator) to own, use, and publish my photographs captured during the “Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation: A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach” study. I provide to them my consent to use the photographs for presentations and publications regarding this dissertation research study.

Contact Information.
If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Dr. Tony Cawthon at cawthont@clemson.edu. You may also contact Ms. Ashley L. Isreal at aisreal@clemson.edu.

I represent and certify that my true age is at least 18.

Participant’s signature: ______________________________ Date: __________________

Participant’s name: ______________________________
Appendix G

Clemson University

Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation: A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach

Non-Study Participant Photograph Release Form

I, ______________________________ give permission for Tony Cawthon, PhD (Principal Investigator) and Ms. Ashley L. Isreal (Co-Investigator) to use and publish my child’s photographs developed during the “Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation: A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach” study. They are free to use the photographs for presentations and publications about this project.

Contact Information.
If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Dr. Tony Cawthon at cawthont@clemson.edu. You may also contact Ms. Ashley L. Isreal at aisreal@clemson.edu.

I represent and certify that my true age is at least 18 years old. I understand as a non-participant that I am not a participant in the study.

Non-participant’s signature (if over 18 years of age): _______________________

Date: _____________
Appendix H

Clemson University

Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation: A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach

Non-Study Participant Photograph Release Form for Individuals Under 18 Years of Age

I, ________________________________, give permission for Tony Cawthon, PhD (Principal Investigator) and Ms. Ashley L. Isreal (Co-Investigator) to use and publish my child’s photographs developed during the “Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation: A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach” study. They are free to use the photographs for presentations and publications about this project.

Contact Information.
If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Dr. Tony Cawthon at cawthont@clemson.edu. You may also contact Ms. Ashley L. Isreal at aisreal@clemson.edu.

Parent’s signature: __________________________________________________________

Date: ________________
Appendix I

Clemson University

Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation:
A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach

Photo-Elicitation Interview Protocol

Name of Participant (Alias): _________________________________ Date: _________
Beginning Time: ___________ End Time: ___________ Length of interview: ________

Script:

Hello [insert participant’s name], it is my pleasure to meet you and I appreciate you again for participating in this dissertation research study. As you may remember from the consent form, this dissertation study is about the use of photography to document how you gathered facts, information, and awareness about graduate school and those deciding factors that made you advance your education. During this photo-elicitation interview, you will be asked a series of questions about the photographs and hashtags that you provided. You will then be asked to make a photomap of all five pictures that you submitted. All information gathered today will be kept confidential. The results of this dissertation study, including your photographs, may be used for future presentations and/or publications. The interview should last between 30-minutes to one-hour. However, the interview has the possibility of exceeding one-hour. I will write your alias name that you selected when you submitted your personal information form at the top of the page. With your permission, we would like to audio record the conversation today. Do I have your permission to audio record it? Before the interview begins, can you provide me with your study participant photograph ownership release form and if you have any non-study participant photograph release forms? Thank you! Well, let us begin the conversation.

Interview Questions:

Introduction

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself?
2. Where are you in your education/career journey?
3. When did you first think about going to graduate school?

Photograph #1
1. Tell me about this photograph as it relates to how you gained awareness about pursuing graduate school.
2. Tell me about this photograph as it relates to how you gathered facts and information about pursuing graduate school.
3. How did taking this photograph help you think about how you got to graduate school?
4. What stands out to you the most concerning this photograph? Can you elaborate?
5. Can you tell me a story related to this photograph? Please elaborate on how this person(s), location, or object was instrumental.

Photograph #2

1. Tell me about this photograph as it relates to how you gained awareness about pursuing graduate school.
2. Tell me about this photograph as it relates to how you gathered facts and information about pursuing graduate school.
3. How did taking this photograph help you think about how you got to graduate school?
4. What stands out to you the most concerning this photograph? Can you elaborate?
5. Can you tell me a story related to this photograph? Please elaborate on how this person(s), location, or object was instrumental.

Photograph #3

1. Tell me about this photograph as it relates to how you gained awareness about pursuing graduate school.
2. Tell me about this photograph as it relates to how you gathered facts and information about pursuing graduate school.
3. How did taking this photograph help you think about how you got to graduate school?
4. What stands out to you the most concerning this photograph? Can you elaborate?
5. Can you tell me a story related to this photograph? Please elaborate on how this person(s), location, or object was instrumental.

Photograph #4

1. Tell me about this photograph as it relates to how you gained awareness about pursuing graduate school.
2. Tell me about this photograph as it relates to how you gathered facts and information about pursuing graduate school.
3. How did taking this photograph help you think about how you got to graduate school?
4. What stands out to you the most concerning this photograph? Can you elaborate?
5. Can you tell me a story related to this photograph? Please elaborate on how this person(s), location, or object was instrumental.

Photograph #5

1. Tell me about this photograph as it relates to how you gained awareness about pursuing graduate school.
2. Tell me about this photograph as it relates to how you gathered facts and information about pursuing graduate school.
3. How did taking this photograph help you think about how you got to graduate school?
4. What stands out to you the most concerning this photograph? Can you elaborate?
5. Can you tell me a story related to this photograph? Please elaborate on how this person(s), location, or object was instrumental.

The Photomap Process Activity

1. Can you place your five photos in order of significance and describe how they build upon one another with pursuing a graduate degree? Please describe in depth any particular activities, interactions, and emotions.
2. Which photograph represents a tipping point in your decision to pursue a graduate degree? Why? Describe the deciding factors.
3. If none of these occurrences would have happened in the photographs (such as activities, interactions, and/or emotions), do you think you still would have pursued a graduate degree? Why or why not?
Appendix J

Clemson University

Examining the Factors Related to How Black Master’s Students Process Knowledge about Graduate School Utilizing Photo-Elicitation: A Grounded Theory Methodology Approach

Member Check Form

Dear Participant,

It’s time for member checks!

First, thank you again for your participation in this study because it would not have been successful without you. I have provided for you information pertaining to your transcription and emerging themes I found from your photographs.

Here’s what I need from you:

1. Please review your transcription that pertains your verbiage in the interview. I will be using quotes for publications and presentations purposes that pertain to the emerging themes. Reply with any thoughts you may have if you have concerns. (See attached transcription)

2. Please review your photographs and the hashtag titles matrix in which I placed all 40 photographs within their overarching theme and subtheme. Reply with any thoughts you may have if you have concerns. (See attached photographs and hashtags matrix)

3. Please review the photomap activity in regards to the flow of events. I had to describe the process of events and how they fit within your photomap activity. Reply with any thoughts you may have if you have concerns (See attached photomaps)

If you do not have any thoughts or feedback pertaining to your transcript, photographs and hashtag titles, and photomap activity, please respond to this email by sending the word “CONFIRM”. Once I receive your confirmation of all the material, I will email to you a $15 electronic Starbuck’s gift card.

Once again, I am very appreciative of your participation in this study. Thank you for contributing to the literature that currently does not include how African Americans process information regarding graduate education. Results from this study may provide useful information to administrators and student personnel that support African American graduate students in their recruitment efforts. Please email me if you have any questions, comments, or concerns.
Thank you and have a wonderful day!

Ashley Isreal
Deputy Chief of Staff, Graduate Student Government
PhD Candidate in Educational Leadership
Clemson University
Co-Investigator
aisreal@g.clemson.edu

Tony W. Cawthon, PhD
Alumni Distinguished Professor of Education
Professor of Student Affairs and Higher Education
Clemson University
Principle Investigator
cawthot@clemson.edu
REFERENCES


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