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*Rowan University*

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**UNDERSTANDING HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO MALES  
CHOOSE A MAJOR, AND ITS INFLUENCE ON RETENTION AND  
PERSISTENCE**

by

Yosayra F. Solano

A Dissertation

Submitted to the  
Department of Educational Services and Leadership  
College of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirement

For the degree of  
Doctor of Education

at

Rowan University

March 28, 2022

Dissertation Chair: Monica Reid Kerrigan, Ed.D., Professor, Educational Services and  
Leadership

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## **Dedication**

I want to dedicate this entire dissertation to my family, especially my mother, grandmother, son, and husband. To my mother Angela, mami- your sacrifices have enabled me to achieve all my dreams. Had you not taken the risk of coming to the U.S. from the Dominican Republic as a single parent with your two small children, Miguel and I would not be where we are today. Look at us now. You can proudly say you raised two doctors (one with a Juris Doctor and one with a Doctor of Education)! Soy tu hija, un reflejo de tu trabajo y sacrificio y soy la mujer que soy hoy gracias a ti. Para mi hermosa abuelita Argelia, aunque no estés físicamente aquí para verme termina quiero que sepas que tus sacrificios no fueron en vano. Has sido nuestro héroe y todos tus nietos son luchadores y campeones gracias a ti. Te amo y sé que siempre estás con nosotros.

To my beautiful son, Hudson, I finished because of you. Thank you for being so patient, as I know that there were many times you wanted to cuddle, and mommy had to write. But your mommy finished one of the toughest challenges of her life so that she could prove to you that with hard work and dedication, anything is possible. To my darling husband, Pablo, thank you for holding things down so that your wife (Denzel's voice) could accomplish her goals. You have been my cheerleader and biggest supporter and continued to encourage me throughout this entire process. Thank you for letting me vent, even if half the time you pretended you knew what I was talking about, and for always making me laugh during this very stressful process. This degree is both of ours, but we are just going to keep it on my wall for now. I love you.

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## **Abstract**

Yosayra F. Solano  
UNDERSTANDING HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO MALES CHOOSE  
A MAJOR, AND ITS INFLUENCE ON RETENTION AND PERSISTENCE  
2021-2022  
Monica Reid Kerrigan, Ed.D.  
Doctor of Education

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the process of selecting a college major for African American and Latino male students and whether these decisions influenced their sense of belonging and development of self-efficacy, as it relates to persistence and retention at a four-year public institution in the northeast region of the United States. Utilizing Harper's (2012) Anti-deficit Achievement Framework, this study used a Narrative Inquiry design to highlight the stories of six African American and Latino male students and their experiences with selecting a major. I collected data/field texts from two individual virtual interviews for this narrative inquiry study. This study utilized Strayhorn's (2012) research on Sense of Belonging and Bandura's (1977) Theory of Self-Efficacy as the theoretical frameworks that helped explain the experiences of men of color with selecting a major. This study revealed that selecting a major influenced the participant's sense of belonging and the development of self-efficacy. Because both sense of belonging and self-efficacy are connected with persistence and retention, the findings of this study indicated that if these students continue to develop strong connections with faculty, staff and peers, as well as continue to do well academically, they will likely persist to the following semester, and ultimately graduate.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Choosing a college major is one of the most important decisions a student can make (Jaradat & Mustafa, 2017; Johnson & Muse, 2017; Porter & Umbach, 2006; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). Deciding on a college major is already an arduous process for most students, and this, coupled with the challenges that adjusting to college brings, can be very stressful for African American and Latino males, who are already struggling to keep up (Jaradat & Mustafa, 2017; McBride, 2017; Roscoe, 2015; Wei et al., 2011). The process by which students choose a college major can be complex, and factors such as the major choice at the start of the student's career and how often they may have changed it are important considerations when discussing major choice (Dickson, 2010).

Additionally, the timing of when a student selects the major is also critical. Jaradat and Mustafa (2017) expressed concern that students generally wait too long to choose a major due to a lack of information about the process of selecting. Likewise, when a student selects a major they are not academically prepared for, it can cause issues with regards to time to degree and lead to serious financial implications.

African American and Latino males are a complex and sometimes misunderstood group of students. Much of the research on these students discussed the significant disparities related to college enrollment and attaining a degree (Ponjuan et al., 2015; Reid & Moore III, 2008; Strayhorn, 2010). Moreover, it was also vital to discuss the disconnect that may occur when Latino students enroll in college and are required to make choices related to academic majors without a complete understanding of the complexities of attending college and of their decisions. Many Latino students lack

cultural capital in accessing information from peers and family, making it harder for them to navigate the higher education system (Ponjuan et al., 2015; Sáenz et al., 2018).

Additionally, Latino students tend to enroll at two-year colleges versus four-year universities due to the open-access format of community colleges and the ability to stay close to home (García, & Garza, 2016; Ponjuan et al., 2015; Sáenz et al., 2018).

Likewise, when examining the number of Latino males attending higher education, while there has been a steady increase in participation in post-secondary education, Latino males still lag their female counterparts (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016). Research on Latino male achievement revealed that the most salient factors influencing enrollment and persistence for these students are having limited knowledge of the financial aid process and paying for college in general, the college application process, and the role of their family (Ponjuan et al., 2015; Torres et al., 2006).

African American males face similar circumstances as their Latino counterparts but may bring their own unique experiences to the table. For example, the deficit narrative has historically focused more on African American males as they have often been called negative terms such as enraged, dysfunctional, and developmentally disadvantaged (Strayhorn, 2010). Unfortunately, these students tend to internalize these words, which affects their academic performance (Strayhorn, 2010). According to Ward (2006) African American and Latino students take longer to finish college than their white counterparts. There were gaps in the literature related to the major selection process for African American and Latino males related to persistence and retention. Much research focused on community college students (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Kelly & Hatcher, 2013; Sáenz et al., 2018), and while there could be some similarities in terms of the

make-up of the student's background, the journey and how these students navigate these types of institutions is not the same.

Moreover, there must be more effort placed on examining the characteristics of these students, the training and development of academic advisors, and how to bridge the gap to ensure that the needs of African American and Latino males are being met and help support their overall support success in college. Further, while research on this population highlighted some of their challenges and shortcomings, it was also essential to discuss the factors that contributed to the success of these students. My study highlighted their personal story. It investigated what it was like for African American and Latino male students to select a college major and whether these decisions influenced their sense of belonging and self-efficacy development related to persistence and retention.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the process of selecting a college major for African American and Latino male students, and whether these decisions influenced their sense of belonging and development of self-efficacy, as it relates to persistence and retention at a four-year public institution in the northeast region of the United States. An existing body of literature examined the experiences of men of color attending post-secondary education and what factors may have contributed to their success (Falcon, 2015; Kuh et al., 2006; Kunjufu, 2001). However, there is a lack of research that examines how men of color and particularly, African American and Latino men select a college major (Dickson, 2010; Ma, 2009; Vincent et al., 2012) as several studies focused on women of color and the process of selecting Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) majors (Rainey et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2015).

Unlike previous research, which looked at African American and Latino males through a deficit lens (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Reid & Moore III, 2008; Roscoe, 2015; Strayhorn, 2010), this study focused on what factors motivated African American and Latino males to choose specific majors. Moreover, sense of belonging and self-efficacy served as the theoretical frameworks that helped guide the study and explained the experiences of men of color with selecting a major. Additionally, most studies focused on first-year students (Duran, 2016; Johnson et al., 2007; Kot, 2014; Leslie et al., 2007), while this study sampled African American and Latino males from all class years.

My research questions aimed to identify the areas that were most salient to African American and Latino males process of selecting a major at a four-year public institution and were as follows:

### **Research Questions**

1. How do African American and Latino males describe their experiences with deciding and selecting a college major?
2. What role does self-efficacy and sense of belonging play in the story of how African American and Latino males decide on a major?
3. What factors contributed to how African American and Latino male students experienced selecting their major?

### **Significance of the Study**

This study sought to explore how African American and Latino male students selected their college majors, how these decisions may or may not impacted their sense of belonging and self-efficacy, and whether or not these choices had an influence on their

retention and persistence. Choosing a college major is already a complicated process for most students, and Chen (2005) argued that students of color may have a more challenging experience than their peers. African American and Latino males have historically been noted as first-generation, from low-income backgrounds, and are often academically under-prepared (Chen, 2005; Dickson, 2010; Ma, 2009). These factors, coupled with their lack of experience with the higher education process, will influence their persistence and retention, as well as the career trajectory of these students (Ma, 2009; Porter & Umbach, 2006). Additionally, there is conflicting research on when African American and Latino males select a major. Some scholars argued that they choose immediately based on a lack of information about their choices (Berrios-Allen, 2005). Others stated that most African American and Latino males tend to be undecided during their first year (Dickson, 2010). These different points were essential to explore and helped explain my research's significance.

Several groups may benefit from the results of this study. First, because this study explored the selection of majors, academic advisement centers can use the results to create best practices for identifying and addressing the needs of African American and Latino males. Additionally, the study results may indicate whether or not there is a gap in the training and development of academic advisors and signal a need for additional studies on academic advisor preparation and cultural competency. Scholars have argued the need to support students of color by becoming more culturally responsive and using theory to inform practice (Mitchell et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2014). There is substantial research supporting the importance of academic advising on retention and persistence and the overall success of students (Cuseo, 2003; Wood & Williams, 2013; Young-Jones et

al., 2013). Providing academic advisors with training and professional development opportunities will equip advisors to help African American and Latino males choose the most appropriate majors based on that student's interests and skills.

Second, this study used an anti-deficit achievement framework (Harper, 2012) which examines a population by designing the research questions to highlight successes and positive attributes about the participants versus typical negative rhetoric. In this study, I used Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework and explained it in more detail in the next chapter. The use of an anti-deficit framework when discussing African American and Latino males redirects the focus to their success rather than shortcomings. This data can provide recommendations to higher education institutions to create programs that highlight these students' success to motivate and engage their peers when choosing their majors. Third, this study will help fill the gap in existing research regarding the selection of majors for students of color and specifically for African American and Latino males.

### **Assumptions and Delimitations**

This study had several assumptions and delimitations worth mentioning. The first assumption of this study was that the participants would provide enough data to describe their experiences with choosing a major and that these would be accurately transcribed and coded appropriately. The second assumption was that these participants would understand academic self-efficacy and describe experiences related to this. And the third assumption was that the participants would be honest and forthcoming in their stories.

In addition to assumptions, this study also had some delimitations, which were the intentional choices I made regarding how I designed the study. First, using an anti-deficit

achievement framework (Harper, 2012) to examine the population bound the study only to consider African American and Latino college men who were successful and thriving in their academic majors and or were currently engaged with coursework in their desired major. Second, this study focused only on the stories of six African American and Latino college men. Additionally, the experiences and the research are not representative of the entire population of African American and Latino men at Sunny Skies University. Third, this study only included African American and Latino college men between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five years old, who were attending full-time, and who had selected a college major or were ready to declare a major.

Additionally, the study was limited to sophomores, juniors, and seniors. I excluded first-year students because it was likely they did not have enough experience with persistence. They also may not have been fully engaged in the major selection and exploration process.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Academic Self-Efficacy*- Academic self-efficacy is defined as a person's ability to perform an academic task successfully (Odaci, 2011; Schunk & Pajares, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000).

*African American/Black Male* - Black or African American" refers to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (Office of Management and Budget, US Census Bureau, 2010).

*Anti-deficit Achievement Framework*- Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework aims to identify reasons why Black males in education succeed and excel, versus why they fail.

***First Generation College Student***- "The term "first-generation college student" means— (A) An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or (B) In the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree" (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

***Latino/Hispanic Male*** - "Hispanic or Latino" refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race (Office of Management and Budget, US Census Bureau, 2010).

***Major selection*** - The point when a student chooses an academic major at their institution.

***Minority student***- The term minority in this study is used to describe both male and female students of color.

***Predominantly White Institution*** - Predominantly white institution (PWI) is the term used to describe institutions of higher learning in which Whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment (Lomotey, 2010).

***Retention and Persistence*** - In this study, retention, and persistence will be defined by looking at whether or not the student remained at the institution for at least two consecutive semesters.

***Self-Efficacy***- Self-efficacy is a person's belief in his or her ability to complete a specific goal or task (Bandura, 1997).

***Sense of belonging*** - The point when a student feels connected to the respective campus community and "experience of personal involvement and integration within a

system or environment to the extent that a person feels they play a special role in that system or environment" (McLaren, 2009 as cited in Strayhorn, 2010 p. 63).

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter highlighted the critical role the major selection process can play for African American and Latino males in post-secondary education. In particular, this chapter provided an overview of African American and Latino males' post-secondary education experience by highlighting what some of the research says about this population. Additionally, this chapter briefly discussed the theoretical frameworks used in the study and the significance that this study can have for future implications. Moreover, assumptions, research questions, and a list of definitions of terms are included in this chapter.

In addition to the above chapter, this dissertation also included five additional sections which differ from the traditional five-chapter dissertation. Chapter two reviewed relevant literature on my topic and highlighted the following areas: academic advising, retention and persistence amongst African American and Latino males, the major selection process, the college readiness gap, and the theoretical framework used for this study. Chapter three was the methodology section of the dissertation and explained my research design, data collection, and analysis, a discussion on my worldview, sampling strategy, rigor, and ethical considerations. Chapter three also highlighted any limitations and recommendations. My participant's narratives are shared in chapter four, and chapter five outlined this study's findings. Finally, chapter six discussed the findings, implications, recommendations for future research and concluded the study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The body of literature reviewed for this study focused on four different areas: how students choose a major, including the influence of academic advising; an overview of African American and Latino males, including challenges and barriers to their success; and research on what factors may motivate African American and Latino male students to choose specific majors. Additionally, this review of selected literature delineated the common themes related to African American and Latino males choosing their majors, and specifically as they pertain to Strayhorn's (2012) research on Sense of Belonging as a construct, and Bandura's (1977) Theory of Self-Efficacy. These areas were vital to my study as they helped fill the gaps not addressed in existing research. The gaps, in particular, were related to how students of color choose a major, other than majors in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), as well as what motivated these students to make these decisions, and how these choices influenced persistence and the success of these students in postsecondary education.

#### **Choosing a College Major**

It was essential to highlight literature that explained how students selected a major in general, research that highlighted how African American and Latino students and students of color choose a major, as well as how academic advisors may or may not have influenced these decisions. The research on how students decide on an academic major is limited and divided into different areas. The first set of studies focused on identifying factors that influenced how students chose a major and these factors differ from study to study (Beggs et al., 2008; Dietz, 2010; Galotti, 1999; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Leppel,

2001; Musoba et al., 2018; Pozzebon et al., 2014). The second set of research was related to gender and race as predictors for major choice (Dickson, 2010; Leppel, 2001; Ma, 2009; Zafar, 2013). The third area that was trending is literature that highlighted how economics and career options influenced major choice (Arcidiacono et al., 2012; Bordon & Fu, 2015; Dickson, 2010; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Montmarquette et al., 2002; Vincent et al., 2012).

Several scholars noted the following factors as influencing major choice: (1) finding information about majors from peers or people they knew (Bordon & Fu, 2015; Dietz, 2010; Musoba et al., 2018), (2) finding a link between characteristics of the job and the academic major (Bordon & Fu, 2015), (3) financial considerations (Arcidiacono et al., 2012; Beggs et al., 2008; Bordon & Fu, 2015; Leppel, 2001; Montmarquette et al., 2002), (4) psycho-social benefits of careers associated with the majors (Beggs et al., 2008; Musoba et al., 2018), (5) lack of interests in specific major attributes (i.e., reputation and faculty influence), (Beggs et al., 2008), (6) the timing of when the decision is made (Bordon & Fu, 2015; Musoba et al., 2018) (7) linking majors to academic strengths (Bordon & Fu, 2015; Dickson, 2010; Leppel, 2001; Musoba et al., 2018; Pozzebon et al., 2014).

Galotti's (1999) study focused on the decision-making process of selecting a major as a real-life choice for students; students are likely to choose a major based on their values and ideas for goal attainment. Further, Galotti (1999) asserted that students view choosing a major from the lens of what matters to them and how their gender roles, values, and interests may be impacted in the future. Both Galotti (1999) and Beggs et al. (2008) highlighted the decision-making process as being essential to how students

selected a major. In particular, Beggs et al. (2008) noted that some students choose a major not based on intentional decision-making but more for indecision and often choose a major with no real research behind it. These students employed heuristics, choosing a major for reasons like not liking to do specifics, like math, or sitting down all day long in front of a computer (Beggs et al., 2008). Moreover, decisions that are influenced by deadlines or a timetable such as needing to declare a major by a certain point (i.e., before the end of sophomore year) can motivate the student to choose sooner (Beggs et al., 2008).

### ***Gender Differences***

Additionally, scholars argued that gender may have played a role in how students selected certain vocational areas (Bordan & Fue, 2015; Dickson, 2010; Doerschuk et al., 2016; Ma, 2009; Zafar, 2013). For example, Ma's (2009) study on gender differences amongst college major choice revealed that the number of males in technical fields was three times more than women at three four-year schools. Likewise, Ma (2009) also asserted that women were likely to choose jobs in the social sciences and education, and men generally selected high tech or business jobs. Similarly, Dickson (2010) stated that twenty-five percent of men chose a major in computer science and or engineering, but only six percent of women chose those majors. Likewise, Dickson (2010) also noted that Black and Hispanic women tend to select majors in the social sciences. There was also substantial research on gender differences in STEM majors, and scholars indicated the under-representation of women in these fields (Ma, 2009; Rainey et al., 2018).

However, while there was a good amount of research about the contrast in majors that women and men chose, there was an absence of research that intersected racial

identity (Rainey et al., 2018) as well as a lack of studies that specifically looked at African American and Latino males and their choice of majors. One of the main reasons for this was due to family pressure to choose majors that had more prestige or made more money. Likewise, all participants were involved in campus clubs and organizations and highlighted leadership experience as being valuable in their journey to selecting a major.

### ***Career and Economic Influence***

A student's college major can often dictate potential future earnings (Arcidiacono et al., 2012). However, Arcidiacono et al. (2012) also described the disconnect that existed regarding students' perceptions of the economic implications and career opportunities available for them and used a model for college major choice that incorporated expectations and assessments. Likewise, scholars highlighted careers and vocations as the drivers behind why students may chose specific majors and utilized the Holland (1973) theory of vocational choice to illustrate how personality, skills, and abilities played a role in how students may conceptualize the process of choosing careers (Johnson & Muse, 2017). Studies that used the Holland (1973) theory of vocational choice discussed the importance of students taking a heuristics approach to discovery.

### **Selecting a Major for Students of Color**

The major selection process for African American and Latino males can be slightly different from that of other students, as many scholars noticed a shift in major choices based on gender and race (Dickson, 2010; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Ma, 2009; Zafar, 2013). A study conducted by Berrios-Allen (2005) on family influence on students' occupational identity found that Latino and African American students may be more inclined to declare majors at the beginning of their college experience because they may

perceive their educational opportunities to be limited. However, Dickson (2010) argued that African American males are more likely to be undecided during their first semester. These conflicting ideas further strengthen the need for my study, as it was clear that more research was needed to fully understand the major choice process for African American and Latino males.

African American and Latino students were often described as being low income, lacking access to academic resources, being academically underprepared for college, lacking cultural and social capital, as well as being the first in their families to attend college (Atherton, 2014; Chen, 2005; Ponjuan et al., 2015; Reid & Moore III, 2008; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). These characteristics are consistent with what many scholars described as a first-generation college student (Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004). Moreover, Chen (2005) explained that choosing a college major for first-generation college students is a challenging experience compared to their peers.

While the majority of studies related to African American and Latino males focused on barriers to success (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Reid & Moore III, 2008; Roscoe, 2015; Strayhorn, 2010), very few explored what other factors motivated these students in their major choice (Ma, 2009; Vincent et al., 2012 ). However, Goyette and Mullen (2006) and Ma (2009) described socioeconomic (SES) status as salient in the major selection process and Ma (2009) found that family played a factor in the decision-making process. Factors, like having support from their families as well as using their socioeconomic status as a motivator to be successful, were not only important to the persistence and retention of Black and Latino students (Falcon, 2015;

Kuh et al., 2006; Kunjufu, 2001) but equally important in the major choice process (Ma, 2009).

Additionally, many studies solely focused on the disparities in the number of women and African American and Latino students in STEM fields (Rainey et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2015). Students of color tend to steer away from majors that require advanced skills in math and science and are more likely to change from a STEM major based on not being academically prepared; these students tend to choose majors in a vocational or technical field (Chen, 2005; Dickson, 2010; Ma, 2009). Dickson (2010) noted that minority populations such as women and Black and Latinos are more likely to change from a STEM major to a non-STEM major than their white counterparts. However, one study by Palmer et al. (2015) examined factors that influenced persistence and retention of students of color in STEM majors and found that students who are in supportive educational environments, attend pre-college programs, and participate in research experiences are more likely to succeed in these majors.

Ma (2009), Porter and Umbach (2006), and Goyette and Mullen (2006) asserted that African American students were more likely to pick majors in the social sciences, which traditionally yield lower incomes than those that pursue STEM programs. However, while students of color are still underrepresented in most STEM fields, a substantial amount of research described the increase in recruitment of more minorities to STEM majors and indicated improvement in this area (Doerschuk et al., 2016; Ma, 2009; Rainey et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2015; Vincent et al., 2012).

## **Academic Advising**

As referenced in the previous sections, many factors influenced how a student may choose a major. By default, when discussing the topic of students' choice of major, there is generally a direct link to academic advising. There is an underlying assumption that while the onus may be on the student to decide on their major, the academic advisor should assist in the exploration process. Academic advising is vital to a student's success in college, contributes to retention and helps connect the student with a resource person on campus (Cuseo, 2003; DeLaRosby, 2017; Tinto, 1993; Young-Jones et al., 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2013).

According to the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), the purpose of academic advising is to "teach students to become members of their higher education community, to think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and to prepare to be educated citizens of a democratic society and a global community" (NACADA, 2006, para. 5). Moreover, much of the literature on academic advising was divided into the following categories, (1) academic advising and student success, (2) academic advising structures, (3) advising at-risk students, and (4) advising and major selection (Alvarado, 2017; DeLaRosby, 2017; Ellingham, 2018; Jaradat & Mustafa, 2017; Kot, 2014; Miller & Murray, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2010; Roscoe, 2015; Strayhorn, 2014a; Torres et al., 2006; Young-Jones et al., 2013). However, while several studies discussed the importance of the academic advisor role, few focused explicitly on the advisement of African American and Latino males (Alvarado, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2010; Torres et al., 2006; Roscoe, 2015). Likewise, some studies also took place at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), but few focused on public liberal arts colleges

or Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs) (Arcidiacono et al., 2012; Boyd & Miller, 2018; Brooms, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; Young-Jones et al., 2013).

Therefore, because my study took place at a four-year public institution recently designated as an HSI, the findings of this study will help fill the gap in the literature.

Mitchell et al. (2010) discussed the concept of being culturally responsive by utilizing developmental advising theories when meeting with students of color.

Moreover, Young-Jones et al. (2013) described the importance of the faculty and student interactions as a way to increase persistence but also noted a need for additional research that would highlight if the contact had a positive effect on retention and persistence.

Strayhorn (2014a) believed that academic advisors have the important role of helping students make vital decisions towards achieving their goals of graduation and overall success, such as selecting the right major, activities, internships, as well as helping them see the value in establishing faculty-student relationships.

There was also a need for additional research that examined the role of the relationship between faculty/staff with African American and Latino males, and the importance of cultural competency research is vital. While there was research that supported the notion that academic advising is central to retention and persistence, many missed the mark on addressing how academic advisors were meeting the needs of their diverse students in terms of cultural competency and use of theory. For example, Cuseo's (2003) article on academic advisement and retention described the importance of African American students needing frequent contact with their advisors, but did not include any strategies or information regarding what the advisor is doing on their end to engage these students.

## **Persistence and Retention**

There is substantial and well-documented research on the success of Black and Latino males in higher education (Boyd & Miller, 2018; Brooms, 2019; Garcia & Garza, 2016; Goings et al., 2015, Harper, 2012) but what is lacking is more research that looks at how these students make decisions related to academic majors in college and how these choices may or may not influence retention and persistence. One study by Wood and Williams (2013) asserted that being sure about one's major choice does affect persistence. The current research on making decisions about majors was general and did not go in-depth about how students of color are, in fact, successful and resilient. My study went beyond the deficit narrative and discussed how and why these students made their decisions about major choices and avoided the deficit mindset.

As noted above in several areas, we know that African American and Latino males face a myriad of challenges and barriers to their academic success in college. But what is missing is more research that highlights their success as well as exploring if and how their choice of major can support this success. And although there are distinctive characteristics to both populations, the purpose of this study was to examine African American and Latino males as a group. More often than not, these students are also characterized as first-generation college students, and this status is also loaded with several assumptions. Research on the persistence and retention of students of color has found several factors that influenced whether a minority student decided to stay in college and ultimately persist. Some of these factors included social and academic adjustment, sense of belonging, minority stress, racism, and under-preparedness (Strayhorn, 2008; Wei et al., 2011).

Roscoe (2015) asserted that because of the increased growth of the African American and Latino populations, there would be a significant increase in the number of minority students entering colleges and universities. The college enrollment rates from 2000 to 2017 have increased significantly for both African American students (from 31% to 36%) and Hispanic students (from 22% to 36%). Still, the rates for women were higher than males in every year since 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). For example, the enrollment rate for Black males from 2000 and 2017 was 25% and 30% respectively, and for women, it was 41% and 44% respectively; for Hispanic males, the rate from 2000 and 2017 was 18% and 31% versus the rate for women, which was 25% and 41% respectively (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Increasing college enrollment and persistence for men of color is extremely important to the overall achievement and attainment goals of higher education (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016) and also important because it signals a need to increase the number of resources available to assist African American and Latino males in enrolling in college and ultimately persisting.

### **African American and Latino Males**

The purpose of this study was to examine African American and Latino men as one population: "men of color"; therefore, the study focused on describing their commonalities versus differences. I decided to explore these students as one population because I was interested in finding the driving force behind their choice of major, their resilience, and what helped these students succeed. Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework aims to identify the reasons why Black males in education succeed and excel versus why they fail. In particular, Harper (2012) cited a variety of services, people, and resources directed towards helping Black men succeed. However,

while this framework was geared towards Black males, I used this same perspective when discussing Latino men due to their many similarities with Black men and as men of color in general.

Disparities among college enrollment, issues with retention and persistence, gaps in college readiness and access to social and cultural capital, and first-generation status, were some of the recurring deficit themes in the literature with regards to Black and Latino students (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Reid & Moore III, 2008; Roscoe, 2015; Strayhorn, 2010). Likewise, although African American and Latino males are among the most popular groups of students researched, even with so much literature available, these students continued to be viewed through a deficit lens (Brooms, 2019, Goings et al., 2015). African American and Latino males are often stereotyped as at-risk, from low-income families, underachieving, and a population that is generally in need of intervention strategies (Boyd & Miller, 2018; Reid & Moore III, 2008; Roscoe, 2015; Strayhorn, 2010).

Although this perspective was prevalent when researching African American males, in particular, it was essential to discuss the factors that made this population successful in college as it could help improve their retention and persistence (Brooms, 2019). Likewise, Sáenz et al. (2018) also discussed moving away from the deficit narrative when describing Latino males in college and the importance of addressing the gaps seen in the literature to identify best practices.

### **College Readiness and Preparedness**

The following section featured the deficit perspective referenced heavily in the existing literature regarding college readiness and preparedness. I did this for two

reasons. First, I wanted to highlight the existing research as it was essential to acknowledge what is already known about this population. The second is because I wanted to be able to compare what the deficit lens shows, with what I found in my research as it relates to success and resilience despite the negative discourse. My findings did reveal that African American and Latino male students are extremely motivated, hardworking and resilient. I outlined more details about these important points in my findings. Moreover, while the profile of an underprepared student is not always homogeneous (Mulvey, 2009), some common characteristics accompany that title. More often than not, minority students and those that come from low-income families are generally looped in this population. Black and Latino males and particularly those that are also first-generation college students are less likely to attend college than their white peers, and when they do enroll, they are often underprepared and not ready (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Knight-Manuel et al., 2019; Mulvey, 2009).

Studies indicated that the college readiness gap affected first-generation and low-income students in more ways than their white peers (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Reid & Moore III, 2008). First, many low-income students lack social capital, limiting their knowledge and access to test preparation and or tutoring opportunities to be able to keep up with advanced courses in high school (Strayhorn, 2010; Welton & Martinez, 2014). Second, research showed that 28% to 40% of students take a remedial class at once in their college careers, and participation in remediation courses is higher for low-income students, Black and Hispanic students and women (Chen, 2016; Kramer et al., 2016). Additionally, while many low-income students may be eligible to attend college, many will leave before they finish due to not being

academically prepared from the start (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016). According to Tierney and Sablan (2014) being academically prepared to handle college-level work is a significant factor in persistence.

There are several sources of influence on the success of African American and Latino males in college, as noted in previous sections. Therefore, it is essential to understand the impact that the lack of preparation for college may have on African American and Latino males as they navigate the process of deciding on a college major. First-generation college students are likely to not choose STEM fields due to being academically underprepared (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). According to Mulvey (2009) research about underprepared students appeared to be mixed. Although some researchers noted that underprepared students demonstrate low levels of engagement, low self-efficacy, and unclear career goals and motivation, others argued that underprepared students do exhibit self-efficacy but may not have the adequate tools to be successful (Mulvey, 2009).

Moreover, there were disagreements about how college readiness is measured. Some believed that high school GPA, amount of advanced placement courses taken, and rigor of coursework indicate a student's college readiness; others argued that benchmarks and tests that measure core content areas are more reliable (Maruyama, 2012). The American College Testing (ACT) has been used to report the number of students who take the test and are college-ready, and according to Maruyama (2012) the results were not good. Porter and Polikoff (2012) stated that a 2009 ACT report "estimated that only 28% of their high school graduating test takers were prepared for college biology, 42% for college algebra, and 67% for college English composition" (p. 396). The reports

published between 2013 and 2016, found that composite scores for students whose family income was \$80,000 or higher, increased, while those from low-income families dropped (ACT, 2016). The gap was also seen in enrollment and attainment between underrepresented students and Caucasian students, high-income versus low-income students, and students whose parents earned a college degree and those that did not (Savitz-Romer, 2012).

Students whose parents made more money may have had access to college prep and tutoring resources, while those that come from lower-income families may not (Strayhorn, 2010). This lack of access to resources may explain why there is a disparity in the scores of students from lower-income families compared to those from higher-income families. Tierney and Sablan (2014) noted that a student's high school transcript often measures college readiness, and an intense and rigorous high school curriculum is associated with opportunities to attend college and persist. However, a high school transcript should not be used as the only measure. Other factors should be considered when addressing college readiness, such as financial literacy, engagement with peers, and time management (Tierney & Sablan, 2014). Likewise, all of these factors contributed significantly to how African American and Latino males experienced college, including making difficult academic-related decisions such as choosing a major.

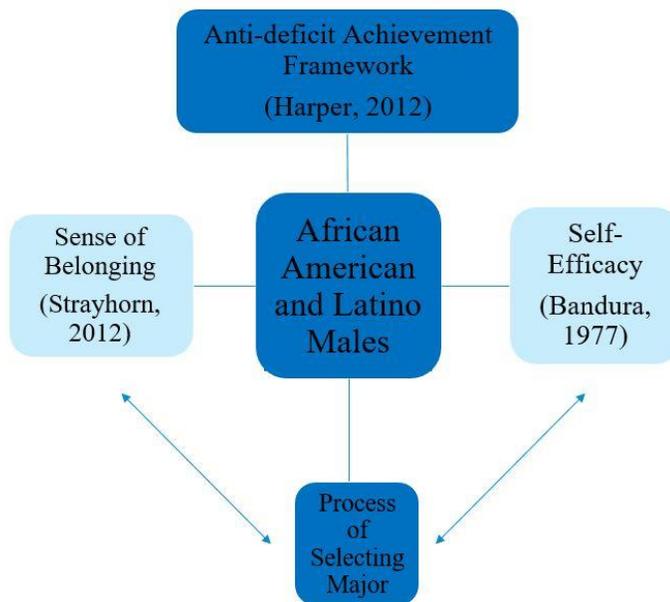
### **Theoretical Framework**

This study utilized Strayhorn's (2012) research on Sense of Belonging and Bandura's (1977) Theory of Self-Efficacy as the theoretical frameworks that guided the study and helped explain the experiences of men of color with selecting a major. I also used Harper's (2012) Anti-deficit Achievement Framework to frame the narratives of the

African American and Latino males who participated in this study. See figure 1 for an illustration of the theoretical frameworks.

**Figure 1**

*Theoretical Framework*



***Sense of Belonging***

Sense of belonging, as defined by McLaren (2009) and as cited in Strayhorn (2010) is "experience of personal involvement and integration within a system or environment to the extent that a person feels they play a special role in that system or environment" (p. 63). "The psychological dimension of belonging refers to feeling valued, needed, and significant within a system or environment", and "humans yearn to belong" (Strayhorn, 2012, p.11). When people feel like they belong, they are likely to

engage in positive behaviors such as starting a family, joining the military and even selecting a college major (Strayhorn, 2012).

Prior to Strayhorn's research on sense of belonging in higher education, there were several scholars who discussed the concept in healthcare and specifically related to mental health. For example, Hagerty et al. (1992) examined the idea of sense of belonging and its implications for psychiatric nursing. In particular, they explored how sense of belonging can help explain mental health and mental illness. Earlier scholars like Anant (1967) also found that there was a positive link between sense of belonging and mental health. Anant (1967) redefined belongingness as "personal involvement in a social system to the extent a person may feel himself to be an indispensable and integral part of the system" (p. 1137). Likewise, Anant (1967) described love as being an essential concept in belonging and explained that a child's emotional adjustment is affected by whether or not they feel they belong. Similarly, Anant (1967) argued that people might feel less anxious because they are supported by the group they belong to (p. 1137). Strayhorn's (2010) research on college students' sense of belonging was most appropriate for this study. It explored many factors that influenced how college students from several groups navigated their higher education journey.

Sense of belonging in college is crucial because it helps students stay motivated towards their goals. A strong sense of belonging has been linked to student satisfaction, academic and social integration, retention, and an overall stronger connection to the college campus (Strayhorn, 2008, 2010; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). According to Brooms (2019) Black males often faced discrimination in the form of microaggressions on PWI campuses, and this caused feelings of isolation, which in turn affected their sense of

belonging. Additionally, feeling unwelcomed or unsupported in some spaces may cause underrepresented students to choose whether they stay or leave a major, which is particularly true for STEM majors (Strayhorn, 2015).

Studies on campus climate have revealed that for students of color, success in some areas was primarily contingent upon how comfortable they may feel (Strayhorn, 2015). Additionally, Strayhorn (2010, 2015) asserted that Black males reported that obstacles such as "racism, social isolation and insensitivity to their unique needs and experiences" all influenced sense of belonging which is a predictor of college success and success in majors such as STEM (p. 48). The purpose of this study was to research African American and Latino males who had declared a major and had been retained for more than one academic year. Therefore, this study explored whether or not there was a link between sense of belonging as a factor that may have contributed to how or why these students may have selected a particular major and whether this influenced their persistence. Several years of research have already concluded that when a student is acclimated and integrated into their college campuses, they establish a stronger sense of belonging and are likely to be retained and persist year to year (Leslie et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2010; Tinto, 1993).

However, there are only a few isolated studies that narrowed down on how Black and Latino students' sense of belonging may influence how they decide what major to pursue (Rainey et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally, the majority of studies focused on the persistence, retention, and sense of belonging of first-year students (Duran, 2016; Freeman et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2007; Leppel, 2001; Strayhorn, 2012) whereas this study examined students across the other class standings, to help reveal

additional information not yet discussed in current research. For example, this study took place at an institution that has a decentralized academic advising structure. Students who enroll with a major are advised by the respective academic department, and undecided students are seen in a general advising office.

This is significant because research indicated that academic advising plays a role in retention and persistence (Cuseo, 2003; DeLaRosby, 2017; Tinto, 2004) and because this study examined the influence of academic advising as a factor in the major selection process, it was vital to explore the student experience across multiple class standings to provide an accurate picture. Moreover, Strayhorn (2012) noted that a sense of belonging is critical for academic success and particularly for students of color. Additionally, Strayhorn (2012) asserted that sense of belonging was linked to persistence and retention and recommended that college administrators consider how they work with students and how their relationships may have influenced sense of belonging. Having a strong sense of belonging has been linked to persistence and retention of students of color (Brooms, 2019; Garcia & Garza, 2016; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Leslie et al., 2007; Museus et al., 2017; Núñez, 2009; Rainey et al., 2018; Sánchez et al., 2005; Strayhorn, 2008; 2012).

Further, Soria and Stebleton (2013) noted that "academic advisors may be able to help students, including those in historically marginalized groups (e.g., students of color as well as immigrant, first-generation, and low-income students), experience a climate of belonging through their interactions with students" (p. 32). Building strong connections with faculty and staff on campus can improve a student's sense of belonging, which in turn, can influence their relationship to the campus community, and their likelihood to

stay at the institution (Soria & Stebleton, 2013; Johnson et al., 2007). Therefore, establishing strong faculty and advisor-advisee relationships with students of color can help these students form a stronger sense of belonging. Núñez (2009) explained that "with respect to faculty interest in student development, faculty-student interaction has consistently been found to be associated with positive social outcomes in college for all students, including a sense of belonging for Latino students" (p. 48). Additionally, several studies have noted that a sense of belonging for college students was a critical element in the long list of factors that contributed to a student's commitment to an institution and their success and persistence (Leslie et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2010; Tinto, 1993). However, there were a handful of scholars that spoke to importance that sense of belonging had on the success of minority students and in particular to men of color (Brooms, 2019; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Núñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008).

Moreover, Black and Latino males are still very much underrepresented in higher education, and although they may have instances of privilege based on their gender, there are not enough spaces on most white-dominated campuses for these students to find support or validation (Bukoski & Hatch, 2016). Sense of belonging is likely affected by connections on campus in the classroom, residence halls, and academic departments; it is an actual necessity for the psychology of a Black student and is critical to their well-being (Strayhorn, 2012).

### ***Self-Efficacy***

Self-efficacy is a person's belief in his or her ability to complete a specific goal or task (Bandura, 1997). Additionally, Bandura (1997) asserts that self-efficacy beliefs

affect how people think, feel, and motivate themselves to achieve their goals. Moreover, Bandura (1997) noted that self-efficacy should not be confused by self-esteem, as both are different but are often used interchangeably. According to Bandura (1997) perceived self-efficacy is "concerned with judgments of personal capabilities, whereas self-esteem is concerned with judgments of self-worth" (p. 11). Likewise, it is also essential to distinguish between confidence and self-efficacy, as these are different; self-efficacy is a construct, whereas confidence is a "catchword" and not part of a theoretical framework (Bandura, 1997 p. 382). Still, scholars did argue that level of confidence in a particular task, competency or ability, can be used to measure self-efficacy beliefs (Pajares, 1996; Sandler, 2000).

Research on the experiences of African American and Latino male students regarding self-efficacy and choice of college major was limited. However, there was much research that connected self-efficacy beliefs with career development, decision-making, and academic achievement for college students (Gloria & Hird, 1999; Johnson & Muse, 1999; Kelly & Hatcher, 2013; Lent & Hackett, 1987; Lent et al., 1994; Komarraju et al., 2014; Sandler, 2000). Additionally, studies also used social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997) to describe career decision-making frameworks (Komarraju et al., 2014; Lent et al., 1994).

Further, scholars like Hackett and Betz (1981) and Hackett and Bayars (1996) also highlighted career self-efficacy, but much of their research is on women. Additionally, there was literature that also emphasized the career self-efficacy and self-efficacy beliefs of African American students (Chaney et al., 2007; McCurtis Witherspoon & Speight, 2009) and studies that highlighted career theory and self-

efficacy with STEM majors (Hackett, 1985; Lee et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2015). However, very few discussed how the major selection process may have influenced African American and Latino male students' self-efficacy. For example, while Hackett and Bayars (1996) research on career development praised Bandura's (1986) research on social cognitive theory and self-efficacy as one of the few that were inclusive of ethnicity, their study focused on African American women and their career self-efficacy.

Likewise, only a few studies focused on self-efficacy and choice of college major (Johnson & Muse, 1999) and others highlighted specific disciplines and gender differences. For example, Johnson and Muse (1999) found that males were more likely to choose non-social science majors than females. Likewise, Johnson and Muse (1999) also found that students who selected specific areas of study perceived themselves as competent and thus felt they could succeed in those majors. However, very few studies examined African American and Latino males' self-efficacy and sense of belonging in choosing college majors. Strayhorn (2015) discussed sense of belonging as it related to Black males choosing STEM majors and noted that academic self-efficacy remained a common theme when describing success in this area. Strayhorn (2015) noted that "patterns of behavior that either single out or marginalize underrepresented minority students because of their race/ ethnicity may leave them feeling less confident than their peers about their abilities (i.e., self-efficacy) and lacking a sense of belonging on campus, which, in turn, can lead to withdrawal or drop out" (p. 49). Therefore, my study contributed to the limited research on the influence of self-efficacy on selecting a major for African American and Latino male students.

### ***Academic Self-Efficacy***

Academic self-efficacy is a person's ability to perform an academic task successfully (Odaci, 2011; Schunk & Pajares, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000). Additionally, Odaci (2011) noted that academic success and a student's ability to believe in their academic self-efficacy are critical. Academic self-efficacy has been linked to success in college and in particular for specific majors (Strayhorn, 2015), but what was lacking is research that connected self-efficacy and sense of belonging to the process of selecting a major for African American and Latino males.

It was essential to discuss the connection between both academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging as both theories promote success. Sense of belonging is the need to be integrated into a system (McLaren, 2009; Strayhorn, 2010), whereas academic self-efficacy is performing an academic task successfully (Odaci, 2011; Schunk & Pajares, 2001; Zimmerman, 2000). Thus, it may be safe to assume that if a student feels like they belong to an academic department and can then complete the requirements of that particular major, they are likely to do well and persist in the next year.

### ***Self-Authorship***

According to Baxter Magolda (2008) "self-authorship or the internal capacity to define one's beliefs, identity, and social relations, has emerged in the past 15 years as a developmental capacity that helps meet the challenges of adult life" (p. 269). Some scholars have found theoretical connections between sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and self-authorship as it relates to college student success as well as persistence and retention (Barber et al., 2013; Clark & Brooms, 2018; Strayhorn, 2014b).

For example, in Strayhorn's (2014) study on self-authorship and academic achievement, he asserted a connection to self-efficacy and self-authorship and stated that "by promoting academic self-efficacy among first year students African American students at HBCUs through social learning practices such as mastery experiences or verbal encouragement (Bandura, 1977), college student educators may also facilitate self-authorship in such students" (p.160). Likewise, except for Torres and Hernandez's (2007) research on self-authorship and ethnic identity of Latino males, Strayhorn's (2014) study on self-authorship and African American students achievement, and Pizzolato's (2003) study on high-risk student's ability to self-author, much of the literature regarding the concept of self-authorship did not focus exclusively on both African American and Latino males.

Moreover, students may move towards self-authoring when they begin to make meaning, consider multiple perspectives, make informed decisions, and construct their visions, values, and motivations (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Barber et al., 2013; Pizzolato, 2003). Scholars argued that colleges and universities may often hinder students from developing ways of knowing and self-authoring by always being ready and willing to assist the student in their educational journeys (Baxter Magolda, 1998; Pizzolato, 2003). While this may seem like a contradiction in some ways, colleges and universities must provide a balance between challenging the student to carve a path toward their own educational goals, as well as supporting the student in making informed decisions about their educational journey. Pizzolato's (2003) study on developing self-authorship in high-risk college students illustrated that they developed self-authoring ways before enrolling in college.

Developing self-authorship before starting college was due to having to make their own decisions without involving their peers for fear that they may be ostracized or ridiculed, based on the fact that they were taking a less-traveled path (Pizzolato, 2003). In terms of self-authorship and the major selection process, Baxter Magolda (2003) explained that college administrators often expect students to make informed decisions about their careers while in college, but this may not always be possible because it requires self-authorship. Achieving self-authorship in college requires a deliberate and collaborative approach from both the student and the university (Baxter Magolda, 2003). A carefully constructed plan should be put in place that requires the student to take specific steps during their college career to make well-informed decisions about their educational experiences (Baxter Magolda, 2003).

This study did not utilize self-authorship as one of the main theoretical frameworks that examined the experiences of African American and Latino male students with choosing a major. However, I believe there is value to exploring the role of self-authorship and how college administrators can help African American and Latino males to achieve self-authorship. Therefore, in chapter six, I recommended further research examining this framework in the context of major selection for African American and Latino males.

### **Chapter Summary**

The review of literature drew upon empirical studies that focused on the areas of academic advising, retention, and persistence of African American and Latino males, academic advising, the major selection process, and the college readiness gap. There were significant gaps in studies that focused solely on African American and Latino

males and how they chose a major. Most research related to selecting majors focused mainly on STEM majors and or gender differences of all students. Additionally, gaps in the literature about the major selection process for students of color and males exist. Further, there was limited research on sense of belonging and self-efficacy specific to African American and Latino males and how they select majors. Lastly, this review of literature also drew a connection between self-authorship and the other two main theoretical frameworks (sense of belonging and self-efficacy) to help explain areas of further research. In the next chapter, the methodology for this study was discussed.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to explore what it was like for African American and Latino male students to select a college major and whether these decisions had an influence on their sense of belonging and development of self-efficacy, as it relates to persistence and retention. This study highlighted the stories of six African American and Latino males in their journey to declare their majors, and contributes to the literature on the success of African American and Latino males in a four-year public institution. This study used a strategy of inquiry that has not been widely utilized for this particular topic. The following elements are discussed in this chapter: research questions, worldview, research design, data collection strategy, participants, data analysis, validity, and rigor, as well as ethical considerations. A discussion of limitations and findings concluded the chapter.

#### **Research Questions**

1. How do African American and Latino males describe their experiences with deciding and selecting a college major?
2. What role does self-efficacy and sense of belonging play in the story of how African American and Latino males decide on a major?
3. What factors contributed to how African American and Latino male students experienced selecting their major?

## **Worldview/Research Paradigm**

Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that it was essential for researchers to identify their philosophical ideas in their research. Rubin and Rubin (2015) described research philosophies or paradigms as the way that researchers view and interpret the world. I recognize that my various identities shape my worldview, such as being a woman of color, a first-generation college student, and also struggled to select a college major in my freshman year. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that researchers must be clear about what "philosophical ideas they espouse" (p. 5). However, while this is who I am, I was aware and attentive of this bias in my research. My worldview is more in line with constructivism ideals. Creswell and Creswell (2018) described the constructivist worldview as including the perspectives of multiple participants, being understanding, providing theory, and is rooted in social and historical construction.

## **Research Design**

Using a qualitative approach, this narrative inquiry study used data from interviews to capture the stories of six African American and Latino males, within the context of academic advising, and the major selection process. Qualitative research situates the observer in the world and places the researcher in a position to study things in their natural setting (Flick, 2007). Additionally, because qualitative research is based on asking questions to learn from what is discovered, the observer can interpret and make sense of what they find through field notes, interviews, memos, and photographs (Flick, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Maxwell (2013) described qualitative research as flexible rather than assuming a fixed and strict process and uses an interactive model of

research design that includes the following five components: (1) goals, (2) conceptual framework, (3) research questions, (4) methods, and (5) validity.

Qualitative research seeks to understand the meaning of what the participants are engaging, experiencing, and actions they are involved in (Maxwell, 2013). Likewise, some goals of qualitative research are to understand the context of how the participant is acting, the process in which the event is taking place, and identifying phenomena that are not necessarily anticipated (Maxwell, 2013). Using this approach allowed me to engage in continuous exploration and learning from the data collection process (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

### **Narrative Inquiry**

My study used narrative inquiry to examine the experiences of six African American and Latino males with choosing a college major. While I recognize that there are different methodologies I may have used to approach this research, the heart of this study was allowing the participants to share their stories. Narrative inquiry is learning about an individual's experiences and life through their personal stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lewis, 2014) Likewise, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that for them "narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience" (p. 18). Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry approach looks at personal and social (interaction), past, present and future (continuity) and the notion of place (situation) to form the metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (p. 50). Using the three-dimensional space in my data analysis required me to consider how participants described their interactions about specific encounters within their stories. As each participant told me their story, I had to closely examine how their

past, present, and future experiences were reflected in different parts of their journey and where these experiences may have taken place. These concepts were necessary to paint a more accurate picture of their stories as they gave more meaning and brought the story to life. The three-dimensional narrative inquiry space has "temporality along one dimension, the personal and the social along the second dimension, and place along the third " (p. 50). I described how each participant navigated the three-dimensional space in chapter five.

I chose narrative inquiry because it was essential for me to allow the participants to share their experiences openly and not feel obligated to answer questions in a prescribed manner. Narrative inquiry has not been commonly used as a strategy of inquiry for this topic. Selecting this type of design has contributed to the body of research on this topic that has generally used more quantitative approaches. More common approaches like the use of descriptive statistics to test hypotheses have been utilized by scholars like Dietz (2010) and Porter and Umbach (2006) who discussed college major choice and the influence on career options. Likewise, other researchers used mixed methods (surveys and interviews) as well as examined secondary and institutional data to explore factors that influence college major choice such as Beggs et al. (2008), Galotti (1999), and Musoba et al. (2018).

Moreover, the process of choosing a major is a very personal one and one that can be influenced by so many different factors, including experiences. It is not as simple as checking off a box on a questionnaire, but instead can be complicated. The decision can be motivated by a series of events and experiences that can be best understood by way of a story. Storytelling is key to describing personal and social experiences (Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000; Rossman & Rallis, 2017) and can be a refreshing means of expression for these participants. Therefore, choosing narrative inquiry for this study was most appropriate and will undoubtedly contribute to the existing body of research by examining the topic from a different lens.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as the researcher was clearly defined, mainly because I identified with the constructivist perspective, and narrative inquiry forced me to immerse myself in the research, take an active role, and work closely with my participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In this study, I spent a significant amount of time meeting with each participant for two rounds of interviews and inevitably connected almost immediately to their stories. Additionally, as the researcher I was honest and transparent with my participants throughout the research process (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). At the start of each interview, I shared my past experiences, specifically about my role as a former Academic Advisor at the institution where the study took place, and made clear any existing bias I may have had. Narrative inquiry is collaborative and places the researcher and participants in a space that supports social interaction among one another (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Earthy & Cronin, 2008). Although it was sometimes difficult, I tried to not let my personal experiences with the topic influence the data or my participants. I was able to deal with this by writing a short memo after each interview to share my thoughts and feelings about their stories. However, one of the critical components to narrative analysis and research is the participant-researcher relationship (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lal et al., 2012; Lewis, 2014).

The relationship formed with the researcher, the research, and the participants can be complex and even conflicting at times; therefore, having a clear position within the study will be significant (Lewis, 2014). Likewise, I needed to exercise an ethic of care and respect when working with participants as there were instances in which the stories themselves took "unexpected twists and turns" (Lewis, 2014, p. 165). This was evident when one of my participants shared very traumatic experiences about his childhood that I was not expecting to hear. I made sure I did not interrupt, share my personal thoughts or opinions but instead allowed him the space and freedom to express himself and share his story. Subsequently, listening to this part of his story led me to ask the student if he utilized counseling services at SSU. He shared he was already seeing a counselor and had an appointment right after our first interview. Maxwell (2013) noted that it is vital to establish the type of relationship you want to have since it's an integral part of the research design.

I recognize that my own experience with selecting a major was difficult, so while I empathize with some of my participants, I was careful not to project my personal feelings and emotions. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain the intersection of the constructivist epistemology with narrative inquiry and note "there is much less separation between the researcher and the narrator, as the narratives are socially constructed from semi structured interviews or conversational interactions, reflecting the theory that participants' intentions and interpretations are as important as the researcher's" (p. 151). Again, as an ethical researcher, I addressed any biases I may have had very early on in the research process. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018) researchers should use reflexivity and include information about their past experiences with the research topic,

their backgrounds such as ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic status. As a former academic advisor, a woman of color, first-generation student, and someone who struggled with deciding on a major, I recognize I carry these biases with me. However, I was open about my background with the participants, and wrote short memos about my personal experiences, concerns, and other things I observed during the data collection and analysis stage, shortly after each interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Bracketing**

As noted above, being conscious of my biases was an essential part of the research process, and therefore, using bracketing techniques in my study was critical. Although mainly used in phenomenology research, bracketing is also used in other qualitative approaches and specifically as it relates to the researcher's epistemological position (Gearing, 2004; Tufford & Newman, 2010). According to Given (2008) bracketing is defined as "a scientific process where a researcher suspends or holds in abeyance his or her presuppositions, biases, assumptions, theories, or previous experiences to see and describe the essence of a specific phenomenon" (p. 63). Additionally, bracketing helps the researcher engage in meaningful reflection with aspects of the study such as research design, topic, and population, as well as data collection and interpretation (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Because I identify with constructivist epistemology, I make meaning of what I am learning and observing based on my past experiences and therefore, brought a host of personal biases to the table.

As I previously mentioned, as the researcher I had several characteristics that I entered the field with, such as identifying as a first-generation student, struggling to select a major in college, and also my experience as an academic advisor responsible for

helping students with major selection and exploration. Moreover, it was necessary for me to recognize and bracket out those experiences. Several forms of bracketing are used for qualitative research. Cutcliffe (2003) described writing memos, reflexive journaling before finalizing research questions, and interviewing with an outside source as viable options for bracketing. One method of bracketing that I engaged in was memo writing, as it was important for me to reflect on my feelings and emotions throughout the research process (Cutcliffe, 2003; Tufford & Newman, 2010). Cutcliffe (2003) asserted that memoing can help the researcher feel more at ease and free to engage with the research without fear they are not objective enough due to their preconceptions and assumptions. Once I was finished with an interview, I began to jot down some of my initial thoughts and feelings so that I did not forget how I felt in those moments. I often found myself relating a lot to the participants and their experiences mirrored some of my own experiences when I was in college. I kept reminding myself that this was their story and in that moment, tried not to interject too much of myself in their process. This was one of the reasons why it was important to bracket out these feelings and engage in memo writing. Additionally, once I began the cycles of my data analysis, I constructed narratives for each participant which I then shared with them. I did this so they could validate and or provide feedback and changes on their story before moving forward.

### **Site and Participant Selection**

This research study took place at a four -year public institution in the United States referred to by the pseudonym Sunny Skies University (SSU) during the course of two academic semesters from October 2020 to January 2021 (approximately 4 months). Sunny Skies University has about 21,000 students, offers over 300 majors, minors, and

certificate programs and is located in Northern New Jersey. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018) 39.1% of the population are men, with 13.4% being Black or African American and 29.1% being Latino or Hispanic.

Furthermore, I chose this site mainly because of the fairly large population of Black and Latino males, and because of the disparity of graduation rates of both Black and Latino males. The graduation rates (fall 2011 cohort) for Black and Latino males at all twelve of New Jersey's public 4-year institutions is 47.5% and 53.4% respectively, and these rates are lower than their peers from different ethnicities (National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDs data 2017).

I used purposeful sampling by being intentional about how I selected my participants. I used extreme case sampling (Miles et al., 2014; Rossman & Rallis, 2017) and emailed my former colleagues and professionals in specific departments such as the Educational Opportunity Fund Program (EOF) and the central academic advising department, and asked that they identify any students who they believed would be a good fit for my study based on participant criteria. In most narrative inquiry studies, the sample size can range between two to four participants due to the rich data that stories elicit (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, I was specifically interested in interviewing a total of six to eight African American and Latino males (3-4 African American males and 3-4 Latino males) who were successful in their majors and doing well at the institution. For this reason, I used extreme case sampling and was deliberate about how I recruited these students (Miles et al., 2014).

Once I received recommendations from my network of colleagues, I emailed these students with details about the study. These details included the purpose of the study, the time commitment, format of the interview, and I shared that they would receive a twenty-five dollar Amazon gift card as an incentive for their participation. My colleagues were able to reach out to 17 students they felt met my criteria, and out of the 17, seven expressed interest. Therefore, my colleagues provided the contact information for those seven students. I then reached out via email. While I originally intended on having between six to eight participants, I ended up receiving responses from six students who agreed to fully participate in my study.

The criteria for selecting these students was that they identify as male, were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, were under-graduates (sophomore, juniors, or seniors), and identified as Black and or African American, and Latino and or Hispanic, or a mix of both of these backgrounds. Furthermore, I only recruited successful students with at least a 2.75 overall cumulative GPA and who had completed at least thirty college credits. I only recruited successful students because I used an Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (Harper, 2012) to examine the population. This bound the study only to consider African American and Latino college men who were thriving in their academic majors. Staying within this range of participants ensured that I could still collect enough data to answer my research questions if I lost participants. Maxwell (2013) noted that it is essential to consider how accessible your data is, any research relationships you have established, as well as ethics and issues with validity. Once participants agreed to participate, I made sure to protect their identities by assigning pseudonyms.

## **Data Collection Strategy**

I began collecting data immediately following IRB approval during the Fall 2020 semester and it continued into the Spring 2021 semester. I concluded all interviews in mid-January 2021. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to data as "field text" when discussing narrative inquiry and described how field text can be collected. Data/field text is derived from interviews, researcher memos, documents, artifacts like photos and memory boxes, journals, and field notes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lewis, 2014). For this narrative inquiry study, I collected data/field text from individual two-part, virtual interviews that were completed during two sessions. Although using a three-part interview format is most common in qualitative research, I utilized segments from Seidman's (2006) three-part interview series in terms of length and spacing, and structuring the content of each interview. Seidman (2006) recommended scheduling interviews for a minimum of 90 minutes and spacing them between three days to a week apart. Therefore, I scheduled each interview for about 90 minutes and scheduled them at least two weeks apart.

These interviews were conducted using the video conferencing tool, Zoom. Zoom is a cloud-based platform for video and audio conferencing, and offers other features like webinars and chat functions via mobile devices, computers, telephone and other telecommunication systems (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2020). Zoom gives the host the ability to use their own private meeting space to invite their select group of participants via email and or text messaging (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2020). According to Zoom, the following security features are put in place to ensure privacy: a waiting room, ability to lock a meeting, end a meeting at any time, encrypted

meetings, the ability for the host to mute participants as well as enable or disabling a participant to record the session (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2020).

Although Zoom has been around for almost a decade, it is now more commonly used amongst many colleges and universities worldwide, especially given the recent outbreak of the COVID-19 (Novel Coronavirus), where many students have been charged to learn how to use various telecommunication systems, including Zoom for remote education (Crawford et al., 2020; Quintana, 2020). Moreover, because all my participants had already been utilizing virtual telecommunication systems like Zoom and Webex, at the time of my data collection, they were extremely comfortable with this data collection method, which is what I had hoped for. We also did not experience too many interruptions during each interview which made the transcribing process a lot smoother. According to Sullivan (2012) using technology tools such as video conferencing for qualitative data collection has many possibilities, including convenience, and note that while there could be technical difficulties and some ethical considerations, the benefits of using telecommunication programs like Skype, far outweigh any shortcomings.

In addition to gathering data from the virtual interviews, I used my researcher memos and field notes to get as much information about what I was studying (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Maxwell (2013) argued that using multiple data collection methods will strengthen the validity of the study and ensure data triangulation. Therefore, conducting two rounds of interviews allowed my participants to revisit their stories, clarify any of their responses, and add more information if needed. Triangulation occurred by using three different data collection sources: two individual virtual interviews, analyzing their annual and chronicle timeline, and memo writing.

Clandinin (2013) emphasized that the most commonly used way of storytelling in narrative inquiry is through conversations or interviews as conversations. These conversations were critical to my research design since I wanted to ensure that I was allowing the participants to tell their stories organically and naturally, and not in a rigid question/answer way. Moreover, my research study was designed utilizing Clandinin & Connelly (2000) interview structure for narrative inquiry. It was not a phenomenology; therefore using a two-part interview structure was most appropriate for my specific study, while also borrowing techniques from Seidman's (2006) three-part interview series.

The participants were informed that participating in the study required that they are available for both interviews. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), "the conditions under which the interview takes place also shapes the interview; for example, the place, the time of day, and degree of formality established" (p. 110). Using a video conferencing tool like Zoom provided flexibility for my participants to choose the location that was best for them. I made sure to choose an area where I had privacy and limited background noise so that I could give them my undivided attention. Likewise, it is essential for the participant to feel comfortable, and selecting the correct setting is critical to the social interaction component that is central to narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Earthy & Cronin 2008).

### **Interview Process**

Part one of the virtual interview process included a semi-structured approach to build rapport and guide the participants to share their stories and experiences in college and with choosing a major. This interview was designed as an oral history interview, which is most commonly used in narrative inquiry, and is "autobiographical and contains

stories" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 112). An oral history interview involves a focus on the process rather than on asking the "right" questions, and where both the participants and the interviewer actively engage in conversations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 111). However, while I did engage in conversation with the participants, it was used to clarify responses, rather than add my own opinions to their story. I never interrupted to offer my own thoughts and feelings about what they shared, instead I tried to be casual and ask follow-up questions only to help clarify what they said. Likewise, borrowing concepts from Seidman's (2006) focused life history, and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) oral histories, I asked participants to share as much as possible about their experiences with choosing a major. The purpose of structuring the first interview as a historical one was to gain perspective and guide participants to reconstruct their earlier life experiences to tell their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Seidman, 2006). I began each interview with situating the conversation with what their life experiences were related to education during their earlier years (middle school and high school) as well as their family background.

I used Jovchelovitch and Bauer's (2011) approach to the narrative interview to structure the interviews. According to Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2011) although narrative inquiry utilizes the same question-answer format as most qualitative interviews, it has some techniques that distinguish it from standard interviewing. They argued that to make narrative inquiry less rigid and prescribed and to help limit the interviewer's influence on the interview, choosing a setting that places the interviewee at the center and minimizes the interviewer's influence is ideal (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2011).

Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2011) used a four-phase model to conduct the interviews that provided an explicit guide to structuring the interviews from beginning to end. The four-phase model is as follows: phase 1 is the initiation stage and involves the formulation of the topic, phase 2 is the main narration and encourages the interviewee to tell their story by not interrupting and only giving non-verbal cues, phase 3 is called the questioning phase and is meant to guide the interviewer in asking open-ended questions, and limits their input, and the last phase is the concluding talk which ends the interview, stops the recording and asks follow-up why questions (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2011).

The second interview was less structured and intended to clarify the field text and ask follow-up questions. My initial goal was to send each participant a copy of the full transcription of the first interview, however given how busy I was during that time, this was not always possible. Instead I made sure to listen to the interview, and write down follow-up questions to help guide the second interview. I focused on missing pieces as well as questions that would allow me to place the participant in Clandinin & Connelly (2000) three-dimensional space. In this second interview I also included pieces from Seidman's (2006) interview structure and combined what is traditionally the second interview (details of the experiences) and third interview (reflection on the meaning), into what was the second and last interview in this narrative inquiry study. Likewise, with this in mind, one of the main features of narrative interviewing is not to include too many pre-determined questions (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2011). The use of language is central to narrative interviewing, and interviewers must be careful not to impose language other than what the interviewee has used (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2011). This second interview should be more organic and conversational, meant to clarify and fill in the gaps

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) by providing details of the experience and reflecting on what is shared (Seidman, 2006). This was the case for this round of interviews as they were more natural since the participants and I had already built rapport.

In this second interview, I worked with the participants to piece together their story. Moreover, this type of interview benefitted from the researcher engaging the participants in the process of creating annals and chronicles. In preparation for the second interview, I sent each participant a confirmation email outlining instructions on how they were to create their annal and chronicle. I made a sample of what I wanted it to look like for this study, but in the end all the participants who actually completed it (5 out of 6) created a linear timeline of events. I found this to be very interesting as well as appropriate given that one of the key components of Clandinin & Connelly (2000) idea of the three-dimensional space is temporality (time). I immediately realized that choosing this strategy of inquiry was indeed the most appropriate. "Through the process of composing annals and chronicles, participants begin to recollect their experiences to construct the outlines of personal narratives" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 112). Creating the annals entails timelines with dates, stories, events, and key occurrences and memories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In contrast, chronicles include detailing events that may be related to the topic, which in this case would be selecting a major (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Participants were asked to create a visual representation of their story, which I described could be in the form of a graphic picture or a timeline of events. I allowed the participants to decide which approach they took to create their annals and chronicles. As previously stated, the participants created a timeline and when we met during the second

interview, they chronicled the details of each key event. The second virtual interview was scheduled for 90 minutes and took place in an agreed-upon time, usually the same time as the first one which was one to two weeks later. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted that the interview structure and how questions are asked could influence how participants share their experiences. Rubin and Rubin (2012) explained that narrative analysis relies more on the way a story is told than if it is true. Narrative analysis focuses on how people describe their experiences, make meaning of them, as well as what hidden meaning may surface, such as their cultural beliefs and values (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Therefore, I chose to keep my interview questions open-ended and this helped the participants freely share their stories which in turn provided me with rich data.

Both interviews followed the format from Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2011). In addition to gathering data from the interviews (conversations and oral histories), I also used my researcher memos and field notes to get as much information about what I was studying (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The interview protocol included in appendices D and E, had the necessary information about the study, an explanation to the participants about the format of the interviews, which provided full disclosure about video recording their stories, and asked them to sign the informed consent form (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interview protocols give the participant instructions to ensure all necessary steps are taken to protect the participants and help organize the interview (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As mentioned above, creating too many structured and pre-determined questions takes away from the narrative interview's storytelling aspect.

Therefore, I prepared between five to ten questions to help guide the participants in telling their story. Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend between five to ten questions with space between each question for notes in case the video recording device does not work. Using the semi-structured approach allowed me to prepare my main questions in advance as well as include some prompts and follow up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). However, although I did have questions prepared in advance, I encouraged the participants to use stories and narratives when answering the questions. As noted previously, narrative inquiry is about having conversations, so I had to be flexible and allow the participants to take the conversation in whatever direction they felt comfortable. Rubin and Rubin (2012) noted that "stories and narratives people tell in the interviews are rich in thematic material" (p. 29). Additionally, the semi-structured method and open-ended technique provide flexibility with regards to the participants introducing new topics based on their responses (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

Participants were emailed informed consent forms in advance, so that they read and understood the terms of the study. I asked participants to scan the consent form and email it back to me in advance of the interview, if they had the means to do so. All of the participants were able to send back the signed consent form prior to the interview. However, in addition, I also asked that they consent electronically by replying to the email with their consent. I went over the consent forms before the start of each interview, and also asked each participant to verbally consent before and after I began recording. I used the Zoom conferencing tool to record each session, but I also used back-up recording via Otter.ai, which was the transcription software that transcribes audio instantly, as well as includes key words and phrases that are easily searchable and also

turns your conversations into notes (Lai, 2021). I took these extra steps to ensure I had good quality audio, and to assist me in the transcribing process. In addition to having a back-up method for recording the session, it may be helpful to provide the participants with a checklist or a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) of common technical difficulties and troubleshooting suggestions to help with any possible connection issues (Archibald et al., 2019). All of my participants were comfortable with using Zoom so I did not need to provide them with any additional information.

Each interview was transcribed using Otter.ai which I used in the background of the Zoom interview. Otter.ai had the ability to record the audio and transcribe each interview at the same time without any issues or conflicts with Zoom running simultaneously. However, while using Otter.ai was helpful, it was not 100% accurate and I did have to manually transcribe many aspects of each interview. This process was critical as it allowed me the opportunity to engage fully with my data and not rely solely on the transcription service. I also tried to make sure I used a systematic inquiry when I gathered my field texts, such as asking questions, observing my participant's body language, listening intently, and creating memos for each interview (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Rossman & Rallis (2017) explain that it is essential for qualitative researchers to use systematic inquiry techniques to scrutinize the data and learn more about the research topic.

### **Data Analysis Approach**

Analyzing data requires the researcher to pick and scrutinize the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). When analyzing field texts from a narrative inquiry study, the researcher must transform these into research text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This process

requires the researcher to make meaning of their field texts and turn them into analytical and interpretive research text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Researchers must ensure that they are fair and honest when reporting the results of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Also, it is necessary that researchers protect the privacy of the participants, which can be done by assigning pseudonyms or aliases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Other essential pieces to the data analysis process include ensuring that data is interpreted as accurately as possible and respecting the confidentiality of the participants by not sharing information that may cause potential harm (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

As I previously mentioned, my data analysis approach entailed recording each interview on Zoom and Otter.ai, which gave me access to the recordings immediately and made it easier to transcribe. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000) field notes can be made by listening to and re-listening to tape recordings. The process of transcribing narratives for this study involved listening to the interview, watching the interview multiple times and using the available transcription from Otter.ai for accuracy. Additionally, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note that "the way an interviewer acts, questions, and responds in an interview shapes the relationship and therefore the ways participants respond and give accounts of their experience" (p. 110). Therefore, it was essential for me to pay close attention to the words that were said, as well as the way both I, as the researcher, and the participant behaved in the interview in terms of body language and nonverbal behavior.

Although the idea was that I transcribe and code my data after I finish each interview, this was not always the case and sometimes it took me days to begin this process. Creating quick memos after each interview helped me reengage with my feelings

about each interview while in the data analysis process. Additionally, Clandinin (2013) discussed the importance of transcribing field texts after each initial interview because it allows the researcher to write notes about the interview and develop a list of new questions or things that may need to be clarified in the second part interview. Moreover, Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2011) discuss the importance of the interviewer transcribing their field texts instead of having another person do it because a lot is lost when it is done by someone else. Additionally, when transcribing a narrative interview, the researcher must take into account that depending on the purpose of the study, there may be a need to listen for tone and pauses as it is important to note the story not just for content but also for the rhetoric (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2011). Because I had access to the video recording, I observed the participant's body language as they answered the questions.

Moreover, because I did conduct two interviews, watching and listening to the first interview was crucial before I conducted the second. Seidman (2006) recommends that interviews are spaced three days to a week apart. Data analysis should be an ongoing process and may occur simultaneously while other data is being collected (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I found that each time I met with a new participant, themes continuously emerged during their interviews and I tried to keep notes of some of the patterns I observed each time I met with someone new.

Rossmann and Rallis (2017) recommend that researchers regularly refer to the data, question ideas, and take notes. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018) data analysis should be treated as a process that involves taking sequential steps. The first step is to transcribe the data, the next step is to look over all the data, and the third is to begin the coding process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also argue

the importance of organizing, reading over, sorting, and coding the field texts (data) once you collect it for narrative inquiry analysis.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

I utilized the Clandinin and Connelly (2000) approach to data analysis since it is most appropriate for narrative inquiry. They explain the process of the positioning of field texts/data and describe what they call the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, which is borrowed from John Dewey's theory of experience and includes situation, continuity, and interaction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). I took methodical steps to the analysis process because I was not able to find a one size fits all to this approach. I instead created my own process, which I described below. I was also careful to not deviate from the essence of narrative inquiry, which is the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The first step I took to analyze my data was to review the transcription from Otter.ai as well as listen to the audio on Otter.ai while reviewing each line of the transcription for accuracy. Otter.ai helped, but there were many errors such as words incorrectly transcribed, so it was essential that I did my due diligence by reviewing each transcription carefully. The next step I took was to re-watch the interviews on Zoom, this time paying attention to tone, body language, mood and other characteristics that would help me understand the participant's story. After I did this process for both interviews, I renamed and saved each file in my data storage folder, and uploaded it to NVivo software which was the first cycle of my coding process. I described the steps I took using NVivo in the coding section below.

One of the key components to my data analysis was using the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as I analyzed each participants' stories. As previously mentioned, the three-dimensional space includes temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). My participants' stories revealed aspects of their lives that were situated around that three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Therefore, before I began to code each story, I used Wang and Geale's (2015) three-dimensional space table, which was adapted from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and filled it in according to each participant's story and how they landed in the three-dimensional space. See figure 2 below for an example of this structure.

**Figure 2**

*Three-Dimensional Space Structure*

INTERACTION		CONTINUITY			
Personal	Social	Past	Present	Future	Situation/Place
Look inward towards internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions	Look outward toward existential conditions, that is, the environment	Look backward to remember experiences and stories from earlier times	Look at current experience, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event.	Look inward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines.	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters' intentions, purposes, and different points of view.

*Note.* Adapted from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Wang and Geale (2015)

I tried to consider events of their past, present, and future and how they may be shaped and or impacted by their interactions in certain places and locations that they may have also mentioned. This was truly a pivotal step to the analysis of these field texts and their transformation into research text. In addition to using the three-dimensional space framework for analyzing the participants' stories, it also helps guide the researcher

through reflections from their notes and memos as well as interactions with the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Coding**

After I finished the process of situating aspects of a participant's story into the three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) I went to the next step in my data analysis, which was to engage in narrative coding. Narrative coding is commonly used to analyze stories. This process requires the researcher to spend a substantial amount of time familiarizing themselves with the data by reading the field texts numerous times and summarizing the main ideas (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I used the three-dimensional space analysis to help me summarize each participant's story. Although Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recommend a program called Nudist, I found that NVivo was very helpful and user friendly. Using qualitative research software programs can help the researcher not become overwhelmed by the amount of data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

My analysis entailed narratively coding my field texts by naming characters, scenes, plot, tone, as well as other storylines that appeared (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lal et al., 2012). The analysis process for narrative inquiry is not always organized in steps and is more complex than merely analyzing data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquirers include their own stories and new findings to the data, which adds to the analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The next step I took was to use NVivo qualitative research software for the first cycle of pattern coding. According to Woods et al. (2016) using NVivo "offered the unique advantage of creating an indexing system of data categories" (p. 600). These

categories were called nodes which was a nice way to view codes categorically. The nodes created using NVivo allowed me to track and organize all the codes and themes that emerged from each participant's stories. During this coding process I created themes in a few different ways. First, I derived nodes based on the most salient points the participants shared. Next, I created nodes related to the focus of the three-dimensional space (situation/place, continuity, and interaction). Lastly, I created nodes specifically aligning with my theoretical framework based on self-efficacy and sense of belonging. This process helped me focus on themes that ultimately answered my research questions.

The next cycle of coding I engaged in was manually coding each transcript for additional themes that I may have missed using NVivo. For this cycle, I also used the process called "in vivo" to take specific words the participants said to create new codes and terminology (Miles et al., 2014). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recommend doing continuous cycles of combing through all the field text to sort and organize them as it gives the researcher a better idea of what data is available.

After I finished my cycles of coding, I downloaded two types of matrices from the NVivo software, one on Microsoft Word and the other in Microsoft Excel so that I could better organize my codes into themes and I did this both categorically and chronologically. This was a very arduous process because NVivo produced over 100 different nodes and also generated over 1000 lines of coded text. Utilizing excel I was able to filter by categories and collapse each node/code to smaller ones. I realized a lot of the nodes were redundant and only used once instead of multiple times. I ended up coding the same text under several different nodes which is why I ended up with so many lines of text. As I stated earlier, I already had a list of themes and findings that I was

keeping track of after each interview. I used that list to compare it to what I had created in NVivo as well as from my narrative coding cycle, to further reduce and consolidate my codes. I used a system of looking at the number of times I used a code to determine if it could lead to an actual finding. Once I was done with this process, I was able to generate a list of the main codes/themes which lead to 16 themes. I then had to collapse those further down to end up with the final six themes that lead to my findings.

The final step in my data analysis process was to create a codebook. Using the final themes derived from both my narrative coding and the NVivo codes, I made a codebook in excel. My codebook was a comprehensive spreadsheet that included several data analysis pieces, such as the theme, narrative code, and theoretical framework addressed, research question and direct quote from participants. See figure 3 below for an example of my codebook.

**Figure 3**

*Codebook*

Participant Name	Theme	Narrative Code	Theoretical Framework	RQ	Meaning	Example from field text
Eddie	Influence of Academic Advisor in major	Academic Advising	Sense of belonging	RQ1;RQ2	Faculty advisor	"I do speak with my advisor. And um, if I do have issues within my schedule or future class. I speak to my advisor to find the right person in the department."
Pedro	Financial Implications	Financial Implications Connected to Major	Sense of belonging; self efficacy	RQ1; RQ3	Choosing major based on practicality and likelihood of getting a high earning job	"And I just feel that I personally wouldn't want to pick a career where I'm going to be dreading it for the rest of my life. I want to pick something that I'm going to like, but then I'm also going to be able to afford bills and pay the rent".
Wade	Mentorship	Staff Relationships	Sense of belonging	RQ1; RQ2; RQ3	Formed relationship with security guard on campus	I look at him as a mentor. Every time in that library, I can be going through something, he would know. I just be having a really hard assignment, he'll just keep pushing me, and say yo,man, you got this. You know, sometimes we'll stop we'll have a quick conversation, but it will be a meaningful one.
Sharpe	Staff Relationships	Campus Connections	Sense of belonging	RQ2	Connected with staff member of color; felt cared for	"I would say in Freeman dining hall, and whenever I spent a lot of time in Freeman. Because Freeman is a very, very quiet dining hall. And I was just thinking, like, Yo, I hate Freeman, like, it's just, I don't like it at all. But I used to spend a lot of time there doing my work. And she used to work at the counter. One thing she would always ask, you know, you want to listen to music while you're doing your homework, there's no one here and then and she kind of made

DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2011) described a codebook as examples and definitions that can be used to analyze data from an interview. They are also vital because they formally organize the codes. Moreover, it was crucial that I included a lot of details in my codebook because it allowed me to continuously review and revise the codebook to ensure I could answer my research questions. It also helped me refocus my attention on what data was most important for my study. Once I had organized the research text into field text and coded and positioned them within the three-dimensional narrative space, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) recommended moving to the interpretation phase.

This next part relied on my research questions as the basis for interpreting and making meaning of the research text and the purpose of my study. My study aimed at exploring what it is like for African American and Latino male students to select a college major and whether these decisions influence their sense of belonging and development of self-efficacy as it relates to persistence and retention. Therefore, when interpreting my research text, I constantly kept in mind what I was trying to understand from my participants' stories. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained the tensions that a researcher may experience as they move to writing their research text. Some of the tension has to do with leaving the field and feeling anxious about the number of field texts, and the tension between being able to connect with our audiences so the research text may speak to them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I certainly felt the tension, especially after producing so many codes/themes during the early phases of my data analysis.

Moreover, as I moved to the interpretation aspect of my study, I had to find a way to connect all my field texts into a narrative text. I found that using the codebook I created in excel helped me make better sense of field text and how to interpret them as narrative text. This process was a bit complicated, because inevitably, some of the field texts of my participant's stories were not very explicit. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain that tensions may arise when examining the field text, and researchers may be faced with difficult decisions about how to interpret their participants' stories best. I found this to be the case for my study, especially since I was working with an underserved population to figure out if their choice of major influences their sense and belonging and self-efficacy. I was able to overcome this tension during the process of

“retelling” the participants' stories. After I finished analyzing the data, situating it in the three-dimensional space, and examining in vivo codes, as well as the examples from their field text, I wrote each participant's story in my own words. I began each story with a direct quote from the participant that to me summarized the essence of who they were and their journey. I then emailed a copy of the story to each participant, and asked them to check it for accuracy, and most importantly to provide me with any missing information important to their story. This process is also a form of member checking which I discussed in my section on validity and rigor below.

Researchers conducting a narrative inquiry study are often questioning whether or not they are getting what they want and invariably find a need to "explain themselves" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000 p. 73). Narrative inquirers may need to find several places where they can explain what they are trying to do to different groups and communities as it will help to clarify and reshape the purpose as needed (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Unlike quantitative analysis, which requires a researcher to test a hypothesis, for narrative inquiry, the purpose and intent of a study may change over time as the research progresses (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It is often a puzzle that will change repeatedly as the researcher revisits the field texts in the process of transforming them to research text for meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Validity and Rigor**

Another critical component that will ensure credibility and rigor is participant validation/member checks (Rossman & Rallis, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This involves taking essential and emerging themes from the transcripts of the interviews back to the participants and clarifying, adding, or elaborating (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

Therefore, the process of ensuring that my data from both rounds of interviews was transcribed and then given to the participants to review was very important. I made sure to email the transcript as soon as I finished it so that the participants could provide feedback before I got to the data analysis stage. Only one participant provided feedback, and I made sure to edit the transcript to reflect the change. Likewise, data triangulation occurs when multiple methods are used to investigate the research question and also helps ensure credibility and rigor (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). To ensure data triangulation occurred, in addition to examining data from the two rounds of interviews, I also interpreted data from my researcher memos, and the annals and chronicles the participants provided. In particular, the use of researcher memos in the data analysis phase of a narrative study provided another rich layer of data to interpret and helped me "move in and out of the experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 87). The use of interview data, memos, and annals and chronicles are all additional data sources that supported triangulation.

There is some debate about reliability and validity in narrative inquiry because it relies more on language and words as data than the traditional post-positivist view of data as numbers (Clandinin, 2007; Polkinghorne, 2007). Likewise, Clandinin (2007) argued that using numbers as data in the human sciences is problematic because it is "difficult to use numbers to capture experience" (p. 16). Likewise, researchers may shy away from using narrative inquiry because they may find it difficult to make meaning of stories from their participants and thus move back to the ideology that using numbers is more reliable and provides more accuracy (Clandinin, 2007).

Moreover, establishing reliability and credibility in narrative inquiry is based on delivering rich interpretations of the participant's stories. Kirk and Miller (1986) as cited in Clandinin (2007) state "researchers who desire a deeper opportunity to establish the authenticity and trustworthiness of their findings may move toward formats of research that allow research findings to be presented in the words of the participants in ways that represent the experience of the researchers and the researched and allow evidence of the quality of the interaction and relationship to emerge in the research report" (p. 21). Simply put, researchers must be okay with allowing the "puzzle" to be picked apart and moved around as the participants tell and retell their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)

### **Ethical Considerations**

While the potential for bias is still possible, because I was no longer an employee at my research site, the institutional review board (IRB) process did not require too many additional steps. It did, however, take a bit longer than I anticipated. Creswell and Creswell (2018) note that researchers must obtain IRB approval before beginning any research. Likewise, IRB requires that researcher identify and assess any potential risks to participants and ensure confidentiality (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) Moreover, I also ensured that students who participated in my study were at least 18 years of age as this reduced the threat to minors who are considered a vulnerable population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). My participants consented to the interview by responding to the email invitation. The email consent form provided explicit instructions, the purpose of the study, listed the questions they would be answering, and explained the video format of the interview. While written consent is generally preferred, an electronic consent via email was used due to this interview process's remote and virtual structure. Likewise, as

mentioned above, I assigned pseudonyms to all the participants to maintain anonymity. I was very explicit and clear to all participants and to ensure they knew what research process entailed and the purpose of my study (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Additionally, other ethical considerations in narrative inquiry involved making sure I was respectful and careful with the stories that participants have trusted me with (Lewis, 2014).

### **Limitations**

My study was limited in a few ways. First, my study only focused on undergraduate African American and Latino males who were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, and did not consider the diversity in the experiences of their peers from other backgrounds represented at the institution (White, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islanders, and American Indian or Alaska Native). Second, I recognize that there is rich diversity and differences represented in African American and Latino males, which may also limit the study since these two populations are not entirely homogeneous in their background and experiences. The study is also limited because it only focused on one public institution (SSU). Other institutions, such as HBCU's or PWIs, may have provided a different context for this study due to complexities that make up these institutions in terms of enrollment size, student diversity, and geographic location. In understanding how these limitations impacted my study, I plan to conduct future research that addresses the gaps that my study was not able to fill.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the design of the research study, which is Narrative inquiry. Using narrative inquiry allowed me to examine the stories and experiences about selecting a college major for six African American and Latino males at

Sunny Skies University. I described in detail the steps in my data collection and analysis process and also highlighted some initial findings that I will discuss in the next chapter. I also focused on the use of the three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) for the study's data collection and analysis. Also, the constructivist worldview was used to frame the study. The role of the researcher, validity, rigor, and ethical considerations were discussed, as well as the limitations of the study. In the next chapter, the participant narratives were described and analyzed.

## Chapter 4

### Participant Narratives

In this chapter, the narratives of six African American and Latino males will offer insight into their process of selecting a college major, and how these decisions influenced their sense of belonging and self-efficacy as it relates to persistence and retention at a four-year public institution. Each participant shared their journey with selecting their majors in their unique way. My job was to take what they shared and re-tell their story in my most accurate and authentic way.

I begin this chapter with the re-story of each participant, which I also sent to them for their feedback. Going through the process of re-telling their story was critical to answering my first research question. Since the stories are situated in Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Space, I re-organized the narratives by restructuring the stories to include a beginning, middle and end. The beginning details important moments in their early lives, the middle describes their experience selecting a college and the major selection process, and the end focuses on what majors they chose and where they are in their process. I also featured aspects that reflect the past, the present and future throughout each story. Next, I reviewed and analyzed each participant's annal and chronicle (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and included this graphic within their narratives.

#### **Annal and Chronicle (Visual Representation)**

Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three Dimensional Space was a very intentional data analysis tool. However, I did not realize how prevalent it would be in the findings. It was very interesting to see how the three-dimensional space led to similarities which

manifested into pockets of themes within my findings. “Through the process of composing annals and chronicles, participants begin to recollect their experiences to construct the outlines of personal narratives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 112). Creating the annals entails timelines with dates, stories, events, and key occurrences and memories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In contrast, chronicles include detailing events that may be related to the topic, which in this case would be selecting a major (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Participants were asked to create a visual representation of their story, which I described could be in the form of a graphic picture or a timeline of events.

Each participant was instructed to prepare the annal and chronicle before the second interview so that I had the opportunity to review it before we met. However, many ended up doing it moments before the interview and some during the interview, which made the experience more interesting to observe in real-time. I share each annal and chronicle when appropriate in each participant’s story.

### **Eddie’s Story**

**“I just chose to stick with marketing because I don’t love it but I’m good at it.”**

Eddie is a Nigerian male who is a senior Marketing major. His campus involvement included working as a Resident Assistant, and as a Peer Mentor working with first-year students. He was also active in his fraternity and enjoyed playing intramural sports to engage with his peers and have a little fun while still following rules related to living on campus during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***College Selection Process***

Eddie’s story began when he first arrived in the United States. Eddie came to the U.S. when he was three years old with his family, who emigrated from Nigeria in 2002.

Upon arriving in the U.S., his family (mom, dad, and older brother and sister) moved in with relatives and shared a relatively small space for all of them. However, this tight-knit environment helped Eddie cultivate a closer relationship with his siblings, who he often talked about with admiration. He also described education as a connector for him and his siblings since they were three years apart and were in school together. His family later moved to a two-bedroom apartment where they lived for several years before moving to a two-family home. Eddie stated

So we came here when I was three, we stayed in a relative's home for a bit, and we were there for I think a couple of months and then we moved to an apartment, and it was like a small apartment for a family of five so it was five people in a two bedroom apartment. We lived there for a very long time. I'm going to say like, like 14 years, and we moved from the apartments to a two family house when I was like, I think when I was like 17 or 18 and during the gap, that 14 year gap.

During his time living with relatives, he remembered his aunt's son was in the medical field. While he did not always see a connection, he now believed they might have influenced him to consider those professions because the Nigerian culture values "higher jobs." Eddie shared

I think it probably influenced me to like, probably to work for higher, like higher jobs cause like in our family and culture. Like, medical field occupations are pretty big. Doctor or a dentist, whatever. So I think that probably influenced me to look at one of those or something similar.

Although Eddie shared that he was not very excited to begin applying for colleges, he knew he needed to attend a four-year college; community college was never an option. It

was an expectation that he attend college, so he knew that he would need to begin to look at various colleges. Education was crucial to Eddie's parents since they were both college-educated in Nigeria. Eddie did not consider himself a first-generation college student since his father was a college professor and his mother was a high school Principal in Nigeria. He explained

So like in high school, my senior year, um, when it did come time to like apply to colleges, I wasn't really like excited or anything. All right, like it's like another chapter in my journey. Um, in terms of pursuing a degree. I was not leaning towards community college; I was more concerned with getting to a four year like getting over into one shot. And like I mentioned my siblings earlier. I'm the youngest of three. So they both went to college. So like, I kind of use them as an example and a guide and like my parents are very big on like school and stuff like they're pushing that on me. So it'd be crazy for me to say like yeah I don't want to go to college.

Eddie's selection process for choosing SSU was based on researching the top colleges in New Jersey and using his prior knowledge of these schools from knowing people who attended. While he did get accepted to two other schools, his top choice was SSU. To solidify SSU as his top choice, he took time to visit the campus to get a feel for it and noted "I visited the campus- because the campus on a sunny day looks really amazing."

He also explained that he knew two friends who were already attending, which made him believe SSU was the right fit for him. Additionally, both of his older siblings attended college and provided him a good foundation for what he could expect. He often cited examples of relying upon his siblings' experience to help him navigate the college

environment. He described how his brother was the first in their family to attend college in the United States and unfortunately went through that experience alone. He shared

Also another cool fact, so my parents went to college in Nigeria. So, my brother was the first one to go to an American school, the way he did it was kind of odd because like he had no help, he just did it by himself. Like in fact, he moved into college by himself- he just left. But, because of that, we helped my sister when she was going to college, I helped her move in, then it was my turn. My parents helped me move of course but I was asking them for help, whether it's financial aid, like filling out random forms and recommendations or questions. I always go to them, I kind of lean more on them than like the school's resources.

Although he did lean on his siblings for advice and support, he later became more independent and found new friends who remained his friends throughout his four years in college. However, Eddie did struggle with adjusting to living on campus and though he was happy with his choice of attending SSU, his first impression of living on campus was not so good. He was placed in a double occupancy dorm room by himself, which made him feel very isolated. He shared

When I was a freshman in my first dorm, it wasn't it wasn't good, like the first couple of days because it was my first time seeing myself in a dorm, and also I didn't have a roommate at the time. So like I was probably the only person on the floor with a double room intended for two people by myself. So I did feel pretty lonely. I was kind of sad.

Eddie was used to living with his siblings growing up and being in a new place by himself did not make him feel comfortable.

My sister was in high school. She was like a junior or something like that, but we always had a good time when we were all in school. And eventually, there was a time when I was a freshman and my sister was a senior. And I was kind of like sticking together with her in classes because I was still in school. But eventually she graduated and was off in college, and was just me at home at some point. So like it was like the first time in a while to like, I was in a house with myself, and like not with my siblings like I was so used to like being in the room with them for like, so for so long, and they finally got to college to have all the space myself was kind of different.

It was clear that Eddie experienced some issues with adjusting to living on campus and away from his siblings. While it did have an adverse effect on him at the beginning of his time at SSU, she was able to overcome this by coming out of his shell and meeting new people. Family support, especially from siblings, was very salient throughout his story as he often shared examples of what it was like to grow up with siblings and how much he enjoyed the close bond they all shared.

### ***Selecting a Major***

Eddie shared that he had an affinity for numbers growing up and experience with selling candy during middle school and high school. These experiences, coupled with his family's influence on his major choice led him to declare Accounting as a major when applying for college. Eddie listed that he applied to college as an accounting major as the first item on his annal and chronicle, followed by examples regarding some of his characteristics related to the account major such as liking numbers and the concept of making money. This part of his graphic is the chronicle, which is generally a “sequence

of events” related to how he selected a major (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 112). This process helped illustrate how he rationalized making the choice to choose accounting.

See figure 4 for Eddie’s graphic representation of his annal and chronicle. He stated

So when I was younger I was very good with numbers, and I have a whole candy selling experience. So like accounting is business with numbers. So I put that together and it's like, oh, I'm good at math and I have business experience. So I combine it like that equals accounting, like the way accounting works.

He also explained that his parents were happy with his choice of Accounting because

They liked accounting because it is like a fancier major. "I feel like it was my parents, and probably family, friends, and like my siblings, because accounting is like a fancy it's like a fancy major within business, like one like the smarter ones or whatever. So like I was very smart, like I was, I was wanting to stay in business.

Although Eddie felt very confident with his choice of an Accounting major, it was not until 2018 that he realized that the major was more difficult than he anticipated and wanted to switch. This is listed as an annal, which are dates of specific memories or events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). See figure 4 for Eddie’s graphic representation of his annal and chronicle. After Eddie took a test in one of his accounting classes and he did not do well, he decided that he no longer wanted to continue as an accounting major.

He described the exact moment it happened as follows

So I was accounting for a majority of my freshman year, I switched during the last two months of my freshman year. So it was in March, I believe, so I was doing very well in the class, and all the courses and I understood everything. It was like

a lot of work like a lot of formulas and stuff. But, um, we took a test one time, and on the test, the Professor wrote some scores on board. And there's like a section scores at the bottom, and he's like yeah so a good amount of kids scored in this section, they did very poorly blah. And I was sitting with a friend and I was like damn like if you're part of that section you should not be taking accounting anymore, like those were my exact words, like if you scored that then you should not be taking accounting anymore. So I like telling the story because it was very humbling. So yeah he told me I should not be taking accounting if you get that score. So the professor hands out the papers, and I look down at my paper, and my friend, he has a big smile on his face. I got mine and it was very low. I just stayed quiet when he asked. So like that same day, I call my siblings, like I don't want to be an Accounting Major anymore. I think I texted and called my parents as well. And I spoke with them about it, and I tried to think of other majors that are still within business.

He then decided to switch his major but stay within business. He sought out his siblings and parents' advice and ultimately decided on changing his major that same day to Marketing. He explained

I've been doing marketing since my sophomore year of college so this is my third year in marketing and fortunately I wasn't behind because most of the classes fall in line. I had to take some extra classes but I'm still on track to graduate. But overall I like marketing a lot better. It's a lot easier to understand. It's less with numbers more about explanation and getting the product out there.

Eddie's journey with a marketing major began early in his middle school and high school

years; However, he did not know it at the time; when he started selling candy to make extra money, he gained business and marketing experience. He shared

I used to sell candy in High School and in eighth grade too, I did it for like three years and I made a lot of money doing that. It was like a little business I was doing that kind of opened my eyes like how business works supply and demand. Um, how to market myself on little sales and deals, how I communicate with people helps get the product better. I'm building little relationships, customer loyalty stuff like that.

Eddie also decided to switch from Accounting to a Marketing major because it allowed him to be more creative and in his annal and chronicle, it is evident that this significant because he indicated that he “loved expressing creativity.” See figure 4 for Eddie’s graphic representation of his annal and chronicle.

But like accounting, accounting is a very great career. But what I've been told all the time like you truly gotta love it. And like I know the people who are in Accounting right now, I'm not sure if they're gonna stick with it when they graduate. Like, it's not an exciting job, versus marketing like you can do get creative with marketing, accounting, you can kind of like straightforward. But marketing accepts creativity.

Additionally, Eddie explained that even if he would have stayed as an Accounting major, he may have done well but may not have liked it. He enjoyed Marketing and is glad he decided to switch.

And um, I am happy I made this decision to switch because I would not be enjoying it like it'd be like, like hard labor, like pulling teeth or whatever, and I

would just get the work done to get it done.

He was also able to gain more experience with social media marketing which was surprising because he stated that he did not like social media. However, he found that working with social media marketing, especially remotely, was very interesting. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic made it possible for him to secure an internship and work from home, which pre COVID-19 may not have been possible. It seemed that because of this, Eddie saw the possibility of working remotely as an option for a future career.

And ideally, once I do graduate, find something that's like either remote or in person, I am not too picky. But um, something like that would also help me in the future because I'm thinking of moving out of state at some point. Like before, I'm 25. So like with a remote job. Some of them are okay with you right now to stay in while there's ones that want you to stay within the state. So I'm gonna kind of use that, to kind of reel me in, but definitely I'm gonna try to stay within the social media marketing.

Additionally, he spoke to his brother and his brother's wife who both happened to do social media marketing and gained some perspective. Although Eddie did not necessarily love marketing, he did admit to being good at it and doing well in his internship. He shared

I did very well and I know I can do better. So, I just chose to stick with marketing because I don't love it but I'm good at it. And like, there's definitely some parts of it that I'm interested in. Like some like organization companies, or like fields I could definitely work with.

Although Eddie was interested in other majors such as nutrition and exercise science, he felt that Marketing provided him more opportunities for career options after he graduated. It was clear that it was important for Eddie to have a good quality of life in terms of where he lives geographically. Eddie discussed his extensive research on locations outside of New Jersey that had no income tax and had lovely weather as these are things that he values. He mentioned that his siblings both moved out of state and seemed to like it and that you can get more for your money in states like Florida, Texas, and South Carolina. Not only are these states good in terms of lack of income tax and warm weather, but they also have more possibilities for finding jobs related to Marketing. Eddie explained

So I researched seven states, I researched the states without income tax. It was like Texas, Nevada, Wyoming, like South Carolina, Washington, and like one more. Um, I noticed that in those states living, I'm not gonna say easier but you can get a lot more for less. I know that for Florida and Texas, people have huge houses, like, the amount they pay is the same that we pay for an apartment in Jersey, so I really like that. And the weather, too, those places have really nice days, like really sunny weather. I don't mind snow but it gets crazy here. We get the worst of the worst. And like it snows too much, rains too hard, and it could be too hot or too cold. So like, I want to be in a place with more consistent weather, and also from my major too, certain states, some of them are the ones I mentioned, like marketing's very big and when there is like more opportunities.

Eddie described seeing more African American students in his Marketing major than Accounting at SSU and has African American friends in the business major.

Marketing wise, there are like a lot of African Americans, I believe. Um my previous major accounting, I wouldn't say there's as much- I would say there is less um African Americans. I find that marketing as a major there just like more-more African Americans in total. And it's probably more like versus other majors too as well. Like I see a lot of people in my classes are also African American around the building. And like, when I go back and ask my friends like what are their majors or whatever. Most of times, it is involved with business. I'm an RA right now. We had like a bunch of RAs last semester, who were involved in a business as well. So like if like business is like a very popular major for African Americans.

He attributed this to the marketing major being less intensive than other business majors that are book heavy and also because business majors allow African American students the ability to express themselves more. He explained

Because unlike other majors. I feel like it's not like you get hit with a lot of books extremely hard like for a marketing major it was in general, most of the majors like you're not studying every night. You are not like going crazy, stressing yourself out like with business it is more or less like at your own pace. I mentioned like with business. Most of it's kind of vocal or like how you portray something if like. I feel like most of us African Americans as a whole, we do like want to express ourselves and like business does allow you to be more creative, like less of like, like less robotic more like fluid.

Although what connected Eddie to the major were his past and current experiences within marketing, especially his experience with selling candy in middle school, he did note that

he did not like the professional aspect that is at times expected of people working business. He specifically discussed his lack of desire to wear suits and ties, as he believed that the real value is in actually knowing how to do the job. He explained

They want like a very professional...They're really big like wearing suits and ties, like oh appearance really matters blah blah blah. I don't like that part, because like you can put like a pig in a suit, and at the end of the day, it is still a pig. I don't really like pretending, like the whole fake it till you make it. And the other part is, networking, I understand that networking is very big, but it only works to a certain extent. People are very big on it doesn't matter what you know, what matters is who you know. Like I can be friends like Bill Gates who can give me jobs Microsoft but if I have no idea what I'm doing like I'm not gonna last.

As Eddie shared his story I noticed that he was very deliberate in how he described his experiences with selecting a major. His annal and chronicle was created as a list of different events and moments in his life, some with dates and others without, and began with detailing the first major he chose, which he later changed based on several factors. He explained

So I wrote first that I applied to college as an Accounting major because I did select it, towards the end of my senior year of high school that is when I started thinking about it. So it's 2018 in the fall. That's when I did poorly in the Accounting test. 2018 I switched to marketing as a major. And this summer 2020 I had my first internship for social media marketing...Probably, I feel like because I think when I was picking accounting and I'd never think I was going to switch, I say like switching majors in college is very common. And there's nothing wrong

with it. It's only an issue if you want to switch like your junior year. Because then that's going to make you stay in school for a year longer. But I feel like switching majors is extremely common now.

Eddie's example of not doing well on his test was an example of a pivotal moment in his major selection process. The fact that he described this situation in his narrative, but then also included it as part of his annal and chronicle, illustrates that it truly was a defining moment in his journey. Eddie's graphic was a good mix of both an annal and a chronicle since he had a list of events and memories (chronicle) and a few items listed by year/date (annal) as well. The picture below illustrates his annal and chronicle, and include locations where he lived, dates of when his family arrived to the United States, as well as information about his siblings. See figure 4 for Eddie's graphic representation of his annal and chronicle.

#### **Figure 4**

##### *Eddie's Annal and Chronicle*

- Applied to College as an Accounting Major.
- Settled in Bergenfield New Jersey, with family. Both parents and one older brother and sister.
- Dad was a college professor and mom was a high school principal in Nigeria.
- Liked numbers but disliked math.
- Liked the concept of making money.
- Love to express creativity.
- Involved with residence life as both an SA and an RA.
- Involved with University College as a peer mentor.
- Became a member of a fraternity.
- 2002- Emigrated from Nigeria to United States.
- 2018- In the fall did poorly on an accounting test.
- 2018- Switched to marketing as major.
- 2020- Had a summer social media marketing internship.

### *Self-Efficacy and Sense of Belonging*

Eddie described how he enjoyed reading at a young age and how he continues to read daily, especially online articles related to marketing and business. He believed that the knowledge he acquired at a young age reading many random things, coupled with his interest in reading daily, gave him the confidence and a perceived belief that he was capable of doing well and succeeding in his major.

So I know some marketing classes like some stuff like, I already knew before I purchased the book, or before I could Professor actually explained to us in the lectures, like that part made me know that marketing does help because all the little knowledge I acquired growing up. It kind of all falls back full circle. And actually helped me with the class.

He felt very comfortable and confident with his progress in class when he knew the answer to questions, when he was "not lost," and could follow along with what the professor was saying. Additionally he strongly believed in his ability to do well academically which demonstrated that he gained higher levels of self-efficacy.

In my marketing classes. It's very rare for me to like not to be sure what's going on, because it's not too crazy and I like too unbelievable. Everything's like, Oh, I understand that, that makes sense, I can see that happening. So it's very relevant to me.

Eddie described one of the things as impacting his sense of belonging and connection to the campus community and his major were relationships he had been able to cultivate with faculty and staff. Eddie based the type of relationship and connection on whether or not it would be beneficial for him to get a recommendation from that faculty member or

staff member. He truly enjoyed getting to know his faculty outside of the classroom and getting to know them on a personal level. He described one relationship with a professor as follows

So the first one I remember was Professor "D." He, I had him for like three classes, I believe, so he started remembering me of course. He didn't call me my name, he called me by my nickname some people call me, but um yeah like after class I'd be talking sometimes, or instead of me going up to him, he come up to me after classes like chatted up, and I would see him after the class and would talk about stuff too. Sometimes he called me randomly in class just like, to see if I'm paying attention and stuff, but like it was like a close relationship like he didn't see me as like a random student that he barely remembers. Like he actually remembered my name and so we had like a lot of conversations. So like he's one of those people like where if I was like five years from now, and I needed like a reference letter, I would definitely ask him.

Eddie also described the impact of being involved on campus through experience with residence life and peer mentoring. Additionally, he had been able to form many connections with his peers and friendships that he valued. He explained that attending training for the peer mentor program allowed him to bond with his fellow peers and became more close with them. He also credited his first job as a Service Assistant in one of the residence halls with providing him the opportunity to meet more people on campus and how he established more meaningful relationships. These moments are also listed on his annal and chronicle as depicted in figure 4. Eddie shared

When I was an SA last year which is a student services assistance- the front desk

people. It was my first campus job along with the university fellows. Starting with the SA job as the first campus job ever did. It was amazing because like I was like very chill, talking behind the desk. And it was how I was able to meet more students within the campus. Like I know so many people because of that. And they all like to remember me. Um going to University College. Over the summer I went to a place called Camp Bernie and did a little bonding. At first, I wasn't I wasn't like close with the peer mentors there's like five of us, but that bonding helped a lot now like we're very close.

He also enjoyed going to the campus recreation center and participating in outdoor activities and sports. The pandemic did negatively affect how he had been able to navigate his senior year in college because he had been constrained on what he was allowed to do and who he could physically interact with. However, he could find a way to connect with his peers, get fresh air and have some fun by participating in open play at one of the fields. He was responsible for helping to create the initiative, which now has over fifteen students participating in flag football on Sundays. These experiences have helped Eddie make the most of his last year and break from the problematic constraints that the pandemic has created for him and his peers. He explained the process he went through as follows

Um what I started doing now, because in COVID. Well they have something called Open field, in the past for intramural sports, um, you have to pay your fee form a little team. Now it is like the open field play so that we have a field...and they have flag football available. Like the first day it was me and like a group of three including myself, we just went down to the field to play football...Now the

group's pretty big. Like, it's almost like 15 people. So, that that alone like made me more connected with all the people on campus because Covid made it hard to hang out with people and have fun, but being able to play flag football Sunday is like very fun. It kind of reminds me of like high school gym where it's like fooling around, or whatever. But I just felt very inclusive or very, very like included in like those groups I mentioned.

Overall, Eddie's story highlighted the importance of family support, resilience, and the desire to excel and do well in school. Eddie is a prime example of someone who was very successful during his time at SSU. His past experiences have shaped his present and catalyzed all he has been able to accomplish. Eddie was strategic and thoughtful in his decision-making process and had a clear plan and goal for where he wanted to go. His sense of belonging and self-efficacy were salient through-out his story and were clear connections to his major choice and why he had been able to persist in school. Additionally, the connections and relationships with faculty, staff, and peers that he had cultivated over the years also helped him make the most of his time at SSU.

### **Pedro's Story**

*"I think I've come to realize that when I really love something, I have a better success rate."*

Pedro is an undeclared junior who was in the process of declaring a Family Science and Human Development major. He transferred to SSU his sophomore year from a private 4-year institution. His background is of Colombian descent, as both of his parents were born in Colombia. Although he was born in the United States, he related very much to his Colombian heritage and background. Before the COVID-19 pandemic,

he lived on campus but was now residing at home with his mother, stepfather, and seven-year-old sister. Pedro was born on December 31, 1999, a moment of major significance to him and where his story began. This date was the first item that Pedro included in his annal and chronicle, which again places emphasis on this being a very important date for him. See figure 5 for Pedro's graphic representation of his annal and chronicle. Pedro described with excitement how he was supposed to be "one of the new babies of the century." Additionally, he explained that his birth was important to both him and his mother and explained that "this is a very important date for her and she's really connected to me because I am an only child." Through-out his story, it was clear that Pedro's connection and respect for his parents was very important to him when it came time to select his major.

### ***College Selection Process***

Pedro is a first-generation college student and was inspired to pursue a college degree because of his parents. He explained that getting a degree will allow him to "be someone in life," which his parent's wishes have been for him. Pedro explained that his cultural background impacted his journey to pursuing higher education. He shared

Ok so being like 100% transparent, like, the thing that inspired me was my parents. Because, you know, like, especially Latino families, they always want you to be better. And so really better your education. And I guess if you want to use like this quote, like, be someone in life, I guess that's something that I always think about, is like being better than like my ancestors and just, you know, keeping my family, making sure that my family's proud of like myself and also proud of what I'm doing.

Pedro then began to share the impact his parent's divorce when he was three years old had on him and how that event was the catalyst for the start of his educational experiences and newfound connections with people. His parent's divorce prompted his mother to move to another town and he then began at a new school.

And I ended up going to elementary school, where I graduated. And that's where, even though I was little, I felt like I, there was a lot that I took away from that experience of being in elementary school, specifically at that school, because that's where I feel like in the long run, looking back now. I made connections with people through that and online networks because I went to that school.

Pedro also shared that his middle school time was where he had the most growth as he had moments of self-discovery. He described this transformational period as follows

So in 2014. I graduated from middle school in Dover, which is really important to me because, in middle school, I started finding out more about myself. You know, at that age, there's only so much you can learn about yourself, but I started realizing some of the things that I liked and didn't like—and figuring out the kinds of people I wanted to hang out with, with. And that's when puberty hit, of course, and I guess I would also say it was a stressful time for me because I didn't hang out with a lot of people because I like to keep the friends of my group of friends limited.

It was clear there were some moments of confusion and uncertainty related to choosing a major and applying to schools. Pedro graduated high school in 2018 and explained that while he believed he thought he knew what he wanted to do career-wise and what major he was going to pursue in college, he later changed his mind after realizing his parents

would not be supportive. He then applied to a private 4-year school but did not settle on a major until he transferred to SSU.

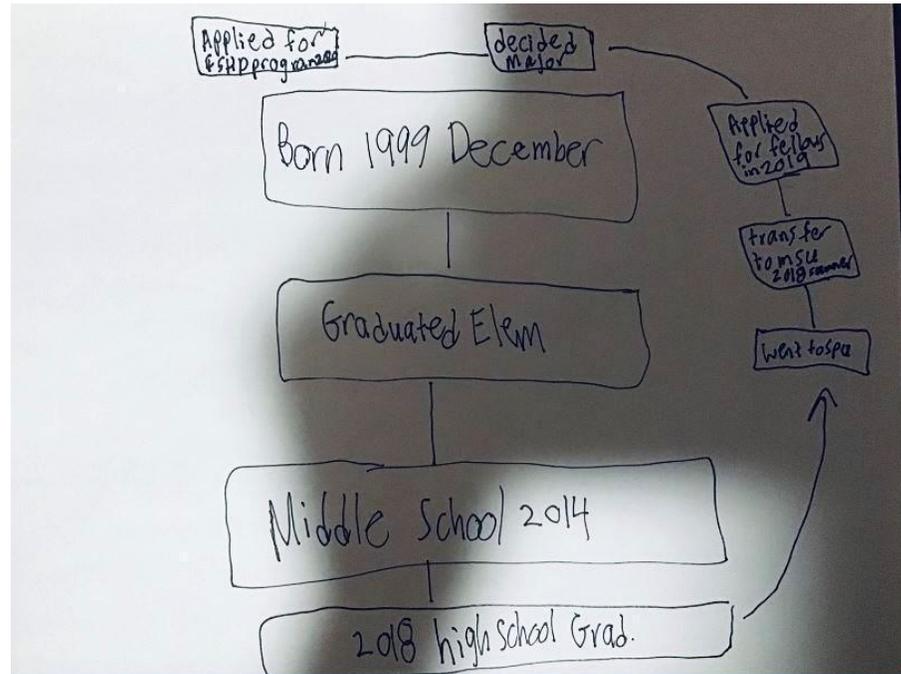
Moreover, Pedro's annal and chronicle were hand-written and illustrated the most important aspects of his journey. It began with his birth and ended with him choosing a major. See figure 5 for Pedro's graphic representation of his annal and chronicle. Pedro also described his experience in high school as a significant one in terms of choosing a major. He explained his process as follows

And then in high school I graduated in 2018. And that's when I really learned more about myself, whereas what I wanted to do with my career, and that's where I started realizing that I might want to do theater, when I got into college and apply for that. But that's when I realized that it wouldn't be a good major for me because you know my parents were not supportive towards that major because of the money and their own experience with others that are in that major.

Pedro's annal and chronicle, pictured below included his three different school transitions and graduations as a timeline to signal a new beginning or fresh start in his life. He listed the year he was born and the different dates for his school graduation. He then does a circular arrow pointing to the steps he took in the major selection process. See figure 5 for Pedro's graphic representation of his annal and chronicle.

**Figure 5**

*Pedro's Annal and Chronicle*



However, while Pedro believed he made the right choice in his initial college, he later realized he wanted to transfer to another school, but the transfer process was challenging. Pedro explained that his former institution and SSU were very different in how they treated him. He shared

Um, okay, so, my experience at SSU has always been amazing. I was a transfer student at SSU, I transferred from X university. Um, I transferred from a university that I felt wasn't really giving me the best benefit academically, because I felt that all of my professors weren't there to support me, where they were just there to get a paycheck at the end of the day.

He mentioned that his financial status impacted his previous experience at X university; they were more concerned about settling his bill than helping him transfer out. He shared

So I ended up transferring from that University because the last thing that they told me was. If you're ever thinking of transferring, make sure you don't have an outstanding bill to transfer to SSU. So that everything would run smoothly. And I was like, okay, you know, that's fine. I understand. Like the bill, you got to pay it or, you know, but like, I wasn't trying to leave on bad hands. I was just trying to leave on good terms. And, you know, and get things done to be able to transfer to SSU , because I knew I wanted to go there, the minute I stepped on campus.

Although Pedro's experience at SSU was now a very positive one; he shared that in addition to the challenges he faced transferring and applying to SSU, he also had difficulty making friends. While he did like the campus and felt academically supported, he lacked the confidence to connect with his peers. He believed this was because he commuted his first semester, and most of his connections were from some students who took the same train.

So I didn't really find opportunities to make a lot of friends. And I didn't see any opportunities because I was a commuter, and I didn't have a lot of time to be going to the events they had on campus. The only friends I did make was on my train ride to SSU because there were other people on the train ride that went to SSU as well.

He explained that he felt like an outsider looking in, as many students had their cliques and groups they were already part of. He shared

So in my experience, as a transfer student, it did affect me, when I first started going to SSU, because it was a little bit more difficult to make friends. Because like thinking back, like now that you're asking this, um, it's like, everyone already had like, their group of friends at SSU. Like, like, as cliché as it sounds like everyone had like their clique, you know, like the skaters or like, whatever you want to call them and stuff. And so like, it was just hard being a transfer student and just kind of like, diving into the community at SSU. And trying to figure out where I would fit in at SSU. So that was tricky.

Things began to change and turn around for Pedro once he decided to live on campus his second semester. He shared

And then my second semester when I decided dorm on campus, that's when I really did see all of, like, build a group of friends because I got to meet new people in my classes, and we started to connect with each other, and also with the help of the fellows program, I got to network with other people, other students. And then we exchanged some information and then we started to work together and become friends as well.

Pedro's sense of belonging increased because of feeling more connected to the campus and receiving support from faculty and staff. He often spoke of how welcoming SSU was and how grateful he was to have received the help he did from his academic advisor. He also remembered getting a great first impression of the campus when he visited, which made him decide to attend SSU. Specifically, Pedro gave credit to his academic advisor for making him feel welcomed.

So the reason I picked SSU to be the college I would get my degree at was because the minute I stepped on campus, um, I spoke to one of the advisors at SSU, which was JS, and like, just the minute I was in her office, like she made me feel so welcomed, and gave me this feeling that any other university I reached out to, like didn't give me. SSU was a school that they not only cared about my academics, but they also cared about everything I did beside my academics like extracurricular activities and stuff of that sort.

Pedro also shared some pivotal moments that shaped his experience at SSU and some that were impacted by his experiences in middle school and high school. Pedro's struggle with a learning disability in middle school helped him advocate for himself. It made him extremely resilient, all characteristics he is using during his time at SSU.

So, when I was born, I was born with ADHD and it is a learning disability that I have to cope with a lot, especially through college and high school like I've always had to cope with that....like that really impacted me as well because I was able to see like, oh, ADHD is something anyone can cope with, like, anyone can have it and they can still be successful. Still, you know, go to middle school, go to high school, and not be seen as like someone weird or something. I feel that if you want to be successful like you have to advocate for yourself. I really tell people what you need to be successful. So, connecting that to my disability. I don't see myself as having a disability if I'm being honest, because I'm just advocating for myself and for the things that I need to be successful.

### *Selecting a Major*

Pedro's RA connected him with other students and opportunities to get involved, including explaining to him the process for becoming an RA. Pedro later applied to be a University College Fellow with the office of Academic Advising on campus, and it was through this experience, he realized what he wanted to major in. His role as a fellow allowed him to help first-year students get acclimated to the campus and help them in the classroom setting. This experience led him to choose a major in higher education. His annal and chronicle highlighted the year he applied to the fellows program and immediately after that he listed "decided major" which indicated that being a part of the fellows program helped him come to that decision. See figure 5 for Pedro's graphic representation of his annal and chronicle.

So this actually this came from being a part of the Fellows program. This is a program if you might not know where we help students in their first year of college, kind of get familiarized with everything on campus. And like that, from experience and from being in like the seminar classes, it really gave me an insight of what it's like to I guess I quote on quote, be like a professor or like a TA of some sort, because not only were we guiding the students, but we were also working with our professors to come up with like lessons to help our students and it wasn't just like, us just being there, it was more like being able to, like create the lessons with our professors that helped me also get a feel of what it kind of be like to like be in higher ed.

Although Pedro understood that SSU did not have a particular major in higher education, he knew that he wanted to choose a major that would allow him to help people. He felt that higher education and working in a college or University was a good fit for him.

One of the things that I'm really like, that I live by every day, is helping people. And that was the main reason I wanted to major in higher ed education. Because I just feel like that's just an overall career where no matter what you're doing, you're always helping someone. And always being a helping hand. And I feel that I've always had someone like there just supporting me academically, and emotionally. So I wanted to be that same example or role model for anyone else, especially in a college setting.

Since he knew that higher education was not a major option at SSU, he settled on a Family Science and Human Development major and planned to get his master's degree in Higher Education. Pedro explained that he was initially interested in majors in the arts like Musical Theatre and Communication Studies. He decided to keep Communication Studies as his minor, because he felt he already had experiences that would translate well to the minor. He stated

So I chose Communication Studies, because I am always online. Like, one of the biggest things about me is that I'm very social media savvy. And I'm always on social media, like, every time people go on my social media, they're like, well, do your social media is always our brand. Like everything you do on social media, like, even if I post a picture, like I always make sure it has good lighting, that the captions, okay, that, like, I'm gonna get a lot of likes, like, I'm really big on that. So when I was looking at the communications and study major, as I looked, and I

said, I already know how to do these things. I read articles and stuff about, like, having a good social media page, and all those things. So I know, like, I have connections already as to how it feels to be in that major for my experience, so why not pick that as a minor? So that's what helped me pick communications as a minor, because I already have that experience on what it was like, if I were in the real world doing it as a job.

He later decided that Musical Theatre was not a practical option for him.

Well, I have put some thought into it and I still wanted to do Family Science and Human Development. Even though musical theatre was, and is still is an interest of mine, I see that more as a hobby. Now, as I took time to self-reflect more, I realized that the best option would be with family science and human development.

The process of choosing a major was a difficult one for him, and he explained that things such as salary and likelihood of success were essential factors for him. He explained

Well, I've always been undecided, because I'm a very indecisive person as it is. So like, picking a major was really hard for me also, because there was just so much that I would think about, like salary-wise, and like, I guess if this is how I want to put it, like how successful I would be in the major. So I that's like something that always kept me being undecided.

Pedro also shared that he decided not to pursue Musical Theatre due to his family's experience knowing people who have not been successful in the music industry.

When I didn't feel too excited about it because they already know people that have majored in musical theater but were not successful. They have actual friends

who have been in the music industry that they don't really do much with their degree. So my parents just felt that it was a big no for them. For me to pick that as a major because they already knew people from experience that weren't really doing anything with their major.

Although Pedro knew that Musical Theatre might not be the right choice for financial security, a high school assignment made him realize what a future would be like if he chose a similar career. He shared

Or being like a producer, or producer as well, like, that's something I looked at as well. And something that really helped me a lot was actually in high school and one of my economic classes, we do like a project, where they had where they had us research, like the major we wanted to get into, get into, find their salary, and then try to like, live an actual life using that salary. So then I was like, No, thank you, like, even though it was like my true passion. They got I don't want to do that I wanted to do something else, when I found out that I'd only have like, \$5 in my bank account, to live off, so I was like no, thank you.

For Pedro, being financially stable was an essential factor in deciding on a college major. His family also had strong opinions on the major he should choose.

So I feel like from my parents standpoint they are more of like, oh, like you need to be someone in life. You have to, you know, like pick a career that's gonna make you successful, not just waste your money and pick something that's not gonna pay the bills, but they're really big on that, and really big on just me getting a degree in general. And I just feel that I personally wouldn't want to pick a career where I'm going to be dreading it for the rest of my life. I want to pick something

that I'm going to like, but then I'm also going to be able to afford bills and pay the rent.

He explained that his family often expressed their desire for him to pursue a major that was in healthcare.

Because I did tell them a bunch of times that I wanted to do. And they've always told me like, Oh, you should do something with blood or something, you know, like in the science stuff. And that's just never really been my passion. I've never been like, oh my gosh, I want to go like play with a needle. Like, just never been my thing. So I told them that it would never be happening.

Additionally, Pedro shared that he has not explained the Family Science and Human Development major to his parents for lack of fear that they may not understand the field's intricacies, and he wanted to avoid stressing them out.

So I haven't really explained it a lot to them. My parents don't really know a lot about family sciences and Human Development, but they don't really know much about it to understand why I'm picking that major. I know it would be a little hard for them to understand because with family science and human development, there is so much you can do with that major, you can be a teacher, a psychologist, depending on your concentration and stuff. So I feel it would be a little more complicated for them and then get, and then make them a little more worried and stressed at the same time.

His desire to pursue higher education remained clear throughout the interview, often expressing how much he wanted to help students through policy change, and make an impact nationwide.

So my long term goals for being in higher education is on making an impact not only on the like at the University or wherever you plan to work out, but also making an impact throughout, like, all of the 50 states. I do want to, like do something to change some of the education like, um, how do I put this? I want to say like I guess guidelines in a way, and really change how universities view students with education.

Additionally, Pedro then expressed how much of an impact the pandemic had on him adjusting to remote learning. He described changes he would want to make if he could develop training and create policies that screen professors on their ability to teach remotely. It seemed that COVID19 had a significant impact on his experience with virtual learning.

And I would want to also change the policies of screening professors who are more capable of teaching through a pandemic, if there was another pandemic to go up to happen, where we would have to be all virtual, like I would want professors to be, I guess, trained, or screened to see if they would be capable of teaching online.

Pedro had struggled with the amount of work required of his classes and felt that some professors had not considered the fact that learning from home does not mean that students have more time; it was more challenging. He described his struggles as

So one of my most difficult things about learning online is that some of my professors feel that because we're all online, and we're at home now, we have all this free time. And they keep piling work after work after work. And it's

expecting us to get it all done. Like through the same deadlines as if you were on campus.

Pedro's challenges with remote learning served as a catalyst for his future goal of becoming a higher education professional and creating change. Pedro had a strong desire to help students like himself with applying for college and navigating the financial aid process.

So I want to advocate for students that are unable to go to college. Because I feel that there's a lot of students that don't have the opportunity of going to college. And if I were in higher ed, I would want to advocate for the students and advocate for the students that don't know how to seek out resources for financial aid, because I know like, there's a lot of students right now, especially with like, some of the students that I talked to, and that email me a lot for help, sometimes, a lot of them don't know how to file FAFSA, or how to seek out scholarships and financial aid. So I would want to change that. If I were in higher ed.

Pedro expressed that he struggled to find out how to file his FAFSA and where to seek out information for scholarships at SSU, and most importantly, where even to find his financial aid package. He leaned on friends who had gone through the process before for assistance.

Okay, so the issue for me was like figuring out how to file for financial aid, and also how to find my financial aid. And some of the processes that I did to, you know, figure this out, I was going to the financial aid department at SSU. And also, looking online, I did research before filing for FAFSA and asked friends had already filed FAFSA to see if I was doing what I was supposed to be doing.

Pedro's challenges with applying and transferring to a new college and navigating the financial aid process were all aspects of his journey that led him to his major. His desire to help others and ensure they do not experience what he did serves as another source of motivation for him to continue to do well and excel in school.

### ***Self-Efficacy and Sense of Belonging***

Although Pedro had not officially declared Family Science and Human Development, he was taking classes in the major and felt confident in his choice. He appreciated that the major, coupled with his experience with the fellows program allowed him to learn more about higher education. He shared

Okay, so, like, just looking back, I like everything, like my experience with the family science and Human Development. I've already had some experience with it, being in my fellows program, and just the whole, like, mission of the department, I guess, to help people and to really like, advocate for yourself. And I'm, that's what helps me feel more confident in the major is just the fact that I already have some experience in that major. So I so it helps me along the way.

When it comes to my academics.

He also shared that it was very progressive and allowed him to learn about different people and family structures. He also appreciated the support he received from faculty in the major, citing a specific example about one of his professors and how they had altered their curriculum to fit the pandemic.

And we are learning about like the different ways people think and how it evolves with the pandemic. My professor, actually what she did was, she took all of the current results and all the assignments she already had, and she like, trashed them,

and then made new assignments. So to connect to like the pandemic right now, because she thought it was very important to, like, God forbid, we had another pandemic, like she wanted us to be able to, like, see all like, the accurate research and like, um, statistics about, like, what's going on with the pandemic and people at home. So that's something that really impacted me also, um, and picking this major, because I was not only able to see how progressive the major was, but also how much information it was giving me and how much I was learning about myself as well.

He felt very connected to the major and the department due to many professors showing him empathy and understanding due to COVID19.

So, I feel connected not just to the University, but the major because of professors at SSU. I actually have one this semester where I had a personal issue. And her response to my personal issue was to take as much time as I needed to accommodate for myself and to really grieve, because I was dealing with something personal. and she did follow up and kept asking me every day like How are you doing, like are you okay and that really came to show that, like, people in that department for my major, do care about their students. And they really want us to succeed. Even if it does mean like missing an assignment or to like finding ways to help us succeed.

Pedro seemed to value the human connection and personal relationships he has cultivated with faculty, as these are essential aspects of a major. He explained

I feel like the professors and the departments are very great professors are all very understanding and they also show that they care about their students. I do have a

professor right now who's a part of that department, where every week he sends out a letter to us. And he sends out like a long letter, just like motivating us, and telling us that everything's always going to be okay. And he just talks to us about things. So I feel like everyone in that department is already like a family, and they all like to connect with each other. So I feel like it is gonna feel like home, once I declare my major.

Although he felt confident in his academics and had a strong sense of belonging to the major, he missed living on campus and attending in-person classes. He explained the technical issues that came with using technology in remote learning, as a disruption to the learning process and one that disconnected him from his major.

So one of those things that I feel would make me more connected to the major is actually being on campus, and being able to get like that on hand experience of being in the major because if I'm being honest, I don't feel 100% connected right now with the major, because we're at home in a pandemic, being- not even being in the classroom, just being on a zoom call listening to our professor. Yeah, and the environment is kind of iffy, because sometimes Wi Fi might disconnect. Or maybe the professor doesn't know how to get on zoom sometimes. So it's very tricky in that way, as well, if we're talking about like, technical disconnection.

He also described getting the opportunity to go to campus once for a seminar class and how that affected his motivation and well-being.

I've only been on campus once this whole semester. And it was actually for class with my fellows, we decided we were going to do an on campus classes semester. And the whole vibe and atmosphere of that classroom was positive. And I felt

more connected with my students, because we were actually there. I was seeing them. We were talking, not just scheduling a meeting on zoom and being like, okay, I'll see you tomorrow. It's like, you know, like, it's just a zoom meeting.

Pedro's desire to advocate for those who need it was woven into the fabric of his story. He felt very confident in his choice of major and in his future career aspirations in higher education.

Ok, so being a part of the fellows program- so it's always about connecting with students, and really focusing on the needs of a student. And I know that's something that I'm really gonna have to be doing when I go into higher education is really seeing what each student individually needs. And that's something that I'm really fond about with being a fellow, because I'm not just improving my leadership skills but I'm also making an impact on someone. And I'm going to help them throughout their college career and give them that hand that I didn't have, when I applied for college or when I started my first semester in college. I feel that being a fellow has really defined who I am. And it's really helped me realize that sometimes even when people don't advocate for themselves like you need to give them that hand and be like, hey, if you do want to advocate, I'm going to be here for you. I want to help you, no matter what. And that's something that I'm really fond about being a part of the fellows program that's given me like a little bit of experience with doing what I'm going to be doing in higher ed.

Pedro again believes his academic advisor was critical in helping him with the major selection process and motivating him to get involved on campus.

So, my academic advisor has been phenomenal in helping me pick a major. And she's really helped guide me through everything, and she's given me opportunities to not just voice my concerns, but also advocate for myself, and she's really helped me become the person I am. And because of her I've been able to really grow more and better myself as a person because she was the one that nominated me to be able to be a fellow last semester, and she's given me opportunities and really believing in me and believing in my motivation and my studies

Additionally, he displayed strong levels of self-efficacy in his major choice based on having the ability to use what he has learned in his role as a fellow. Additionally, his annal and chronicle illustrated in figure 5, lists him applying to the FSHD major as the last item on his timeline, which signals the completion of his major selection process..

He shared

I think I've come to realize that when I really love something. I have better success rate. So that's what I was seeing all around with that is FSHD major. That I was really really interested in it and I was showing motivation. And I was giving myself more motivation to be successful in it because I wanted to apply for the program. So, I was showing like higher grades and stuff for picking that major.

Overall, Pedro's story highlighted the importance of advocacy, family support, mentorship, motivation, and resiliency. Pedro was thoughtful in his approach to what he wanted to do in the future, carefully selecting experiences that enhanced his resume and motivated him to do well socially and academically. Pedro's experiences as a first-generation Latino male have made him passionate about helping students pursue a college education and providing them the necessary resources to do so. His story further

supported his desire to make a difference and impact students like him by pursuing a Family Science and Human Development major and his future aspiration to become a higher education professional.

### **Jones's Story**

**"I adapted and adjusted to everything from little to big and I was just staying strong..so that just shows I wasn't giving up."**

Jones is an African American male and undeclared junior in the process of selecting his major but whose true passion is in theatre arts. Jones's involvement on campus was as a student-athlete; he was a distance runner on the track team. He was also interested in health and fitness and enjoyed working out at the campus recreation center. Before attending SSU, Jones took classes at his community college while working several jobs. Jones's story began with a deep dive into his past as he recollects earlier memories growing up living with family members, including his mother, father, and some siblings. Jones described his early life and adolescence as very hard. And although Jones shared that the many traumatic experiences he faced growing up have impacted his daily life, he is a very resilient person.

### ***College Selection Process***

Jones explained that he experienced a lot of turmoil in his home, often citing verbal abuse and bullying examples. He shared

Ever since I dealt with, like, I pretty much had a traumatic childhood....And later on, as I was going through the verbal abuse from my immediate family members like my mother and father and their siblings, the verbal abuse, some of it physically got a lot worse. I decided the only way to get on my feet, instead of

having their support like a kid should have from their family members, was to leave.

These circumstances led him to seek refuge at a homeless shelter near the county college he attended. Jones shared, "but anyway, I overcame that chapter and moved to the shelter.. I decided to live in a living program, like a shelter place in Toms River in Ocean County." While he did note that the homeless shelter had its set of challenges as well, it did allow him the opportunity to separate himself from the hostile environment in his home and focus on working and going to school.

That's when, um, I had two jobs when I first started living there. And one was seasonal, so I just kept the other one. Even from the first day when I moved there until I went to Ocean County College to build up credits, you know that whole process to come to a four-year institution.

He discussed his desire to get a college degree stems from wanting a better life and gaining more experience. He described his background as follows

So, I thought it would be good like, Okay, I have a degree in theater and dance or minor in humanities or, you know, or vice versa so that would be good like on a resume at least it will show I have experience because I don't have a lot of experience. This is due to the fact that both where I came from, like each setting, my school setting was poor, my home setting was poor, even just like even going out like hanging out, with people from my generation like my age, everything around me was just like that, like poor, not very good. The people I had to deal with or had to deal with and sometimes I still deal with. I don't want to say it sucks. I would say, you know, it's not good.

Jones was able to save enough money to begin applying to 4-year colleges. He explained that he applied to in-state schools and out of state and looked at colleges and universities with solid theatre arts programs.

So, and then I applied to William Paterson, Kean University in Union and Montclair. I applied to many schools. I even applied to a school in California; the Polytechnic one in Pomona, California. I really wanted to go there because I already knew it had a good theater program, besides what I read on Wikipedia and on the website. Just one of those California universities, California State. The Pomona one or the LA actual LA one or San Diego. I think I applied to Arizona - University of Arizona or Phoenix, something like that.

However, though he did aspire to live out of state, he landed on SSU as the school he ultimately decided to attend. He was accepted to SSU as a freshman because not enough of his community college credits transferred over; he should have been a rising junior but instead began as a first-year student. He admitted that beginning as a first-year student allowed him the opportunity to get the college experience fully. Jones navigated his time at SSU with the support of two programs he was a part of and stated "I'm an EOF student and also a SSU Red Hawk (RH) fellows student. And it's a little program from the Dean of Students office that helps independent students, similar to EOF."

Jones was also accepted as an Educational Opportunity Fund scholar (EOF), a program aimed to provide higher education to highly motivated students from low-income communities. He credits EOF for providing him support and resources and sees it as another "plug" in terms of providing him opportunities and tools he needs to succeed. Jones described his experience with EOF as a place that he went to when he needed help

and explained that his relationship with his EOF counselor was "decent," he only sought her out when he had to since he is required to meet with her monthly. He shared

Being an EOF student, it's a great thing; it is a decent experience; I'm not going to say it's been the best resource, you know, but it has been decent. It's just more, it's just another plug, you know, for you to be in a more of an okay place, but I am still doing a lot of things on my own, here and there. Every month, one day a month, I am supposed to see her; I am talking about my counselor. It's a requirement to see her.

Although he described his relationship with his EOF counselor as a prescriptive one, he was compliant and made sure he connected with her at least once a month.

### ***Selecting a Major***

When describing selecting a major, he shared that he was very passionate about the arts because it had helped him cope with all the hard times in his life. He explained, "even though for now I'm majoring in humanities. I feel more connected with the arts because it's my passion, it helped me get through a lot of trauma." Jones described himself as a very talented and creative person; he liked to act and sing. These talents naturally made him gravitate towards majors in the arts. Jones also said

I applied to a university in Florida, the music school, because I am passionate about music besides acting. I sing daily even if I'm not planning to write or record a song so I think that's what has got me through a lot of tough times in my life is definitely music.

In addition to his interest in music and the arts, he was interested in Television production and media studies. However, these majors required a specific GPA, and unfortunately, he

did not meet the requirement. Therefore, through his EOF counselor/academic advisor's assistance, Jones planned to continue pursuing a major in theatre arts but in tandem with researching and taking courses in the Humanities as a backup option. He shared

I wanted to major in theater and dance acting, but I got rejected twice three times. I auditioned twice for the major because that's how you audition to go through that process. And then, of course, you have to audition for a play to get experience on my resume. And all those three times I auditioned, I was rejected. And then later on, since I took most of my gen eds for the humanities major, I decided, well, my EOF advisor just advised me like maybe this will probably be a decent route. I mean, I could always change it back to acting, once I do, you know, audition again, which I do plan to.

Moreover, in his pursuit to solidify his choice in the humanities major, he had taken steps to meet with faculty to learn more about it.

I recently had an appointment with Joseph, I forgot his last name, but we had an appointment via Zoom. And he pretty much ran down all the information about the humanities department, and like the major and stuff like that, so it seemed pretty good. I seem more in tune; I guess that's a proper term to use for that major because before, I was like, what am I going to do with this major.

### ***Self-Efficacy and Sense of Belonging***

Jones was very thoughtful and strategic about making connections and establishing relationships with faculty and staff to help him be more successful. He explained that he did take advantage of the many campus resources available to him and explained that he consistently sought out tutoring services for his classes. He also

described his struggles with a developmental disability and his use of the Disability Resource Center to help with his classes' accommodations. He explained

The Disability Resource Center (DRC) is where I got my accommodation letters. That's why there are a few assignments, why I'm taking so long. There are just other assignments as well. They're like the same level as the assignments and are late, so I got extensions for everything. With that accommodation letter from the DRC, I also get a lot of tutoring. Recently I had a tutoring session for a paper I was supposed to submit.

By attending tutoring sessions and receiving accommodations from the DRC, Jones was able to do a lot better in his classes which in turn increased his levels of academic self-efficacy.

Jones was also part of the SSU RH fellows program for independent students who lack family support and have gone through difficult circumstances before attending college. He described the program as "just another group, just like EOF, I'm an independent student with a story of past traumatic experiences, and I don't have the best support from family." The SSU RH fellows program, different from the University College fellow's program, provides social services, counseling, academic support, and career development. Jones referred to the program as "another group" like EOF, to illustrate another support service he benefits from. Participating in groups like EOF and the SSU RH fellows program have helped Jones become more connected to the campus community that he once felt isolated from and impacted his sense of belonging. He explained that they have aided him by providing services when most students have their

own families to lean on. For example, he shared that they provided a nice meal during Thanksgiving. He explains

So he (social service advisor) and his two interns had this thanksgiving dinner. It was like grab and go, of course, due to who was going on, like, you can't sit down and enjoy it. So it was just containers and bags and like food to grab and go. So I got the email; I signed up the time through email and let them know that I'm one of the few coming to get food. Why not?

In addition to having the support of the EOF program and the SSU RH fellows program, Jones also found comfort in working out and going to the recreation center. He explained that he was on a quest to be healthier and get fit before the pandemic. He described his experience as follows

Although it is cold, I could always go to the Rec Center, not every day because of what is currently going on (pandemic), so I'll go here and there when I can see my trainer. I just renewed our monthly six sessions. So that is good. He's another one of those people, you know, he's helping me out as I get in shape too.

Jones also described his experience with connecting and belonging to the campus community when he first transferred as a challenging one, but once he discovered his likes and passions, he was able to make a more concerted effort to connect with those areas. He shared

When I first got here, especially when I first got here until now, the majority of the time, I didn't feel like I connected here, well, only just the arts. And of course I like fitness and the gym, and I like athletics because I'm an athlete. So that's it, I am most connected to the arts and then, of course fitness and the track. You know

those two are my areas, and it was up to me to push myself into those areas because that's where both of my passions are. So, yeah, those are the areas I feel like I belong to the most.

These physical and now virtual spaces have given Jones a home away from home and supported his sense of belonging. In addition to participating in these two different programs, he was also part of the track team, which he said had its ups and downs. Jones suffered from some health issues related to his heart, which caused him to experience a few "health episodes" during his time as SSU. In addition to it affecting him during his academic studies and during auditions, he explained that it also impacted his ability to participate in sports. Another area that Jones needed to navigate was living with people who were not like him. He shared that he had issues with the first roommate he was assigned and explained that there was an instance of bullying. Nonetheless, he persevered and got the medical help he needed to cope with this ongoing condition; and also applied for a room change and was now in a better living arrangement. This further demonstrates just how strong and resilient Jones is. He explained

Even though I've been through a lot, I kept going even coming to SSU. I'm still going through a lot, even overcoming the health issues, the roommate issues, and socializing with other students trying to make friends. I overcame those things, and I am still overcoming that.

One specific example of resilience that Jones shared was when he auditioned for the Theatre Arts major wearing a heart monitor. He described this as

But they had me at the time with this heart monitor; I even auditioned with the heart monitor on my chest. So that shows I wasn't giving up, even if I had health stuff going on before the pandemic.

Although Jones's story was very different from the other participant's; he undoubtedly faced a myriad of challenges and struggles unlike anything the other participants shared, but the common thread was his thirst for new knowledge in his quest for success. Jones's story illustrated a person who had worked hard to change his circumstances, and he had continuously shown that nothing can get in the way of him pursuing his dreams. Jones's experiences with trauma, abuse, and challenges with his health have made him strong and undoubtedly catalyze all the great things he has been able to accomplish and has yet to achieve. Jones's ability to be fully transparent about his journey will inspire others and help him continue to push toward achieving his dreams. While there were many instances where Jones's story reflects a deficit tone, his resiliency and ability to seek out support from others, especially utilizing his resources, indicate that he has developed a sense of belonging and increased levels of self-efficacy

### **Wade's Story**

**“My mom is a hustler- like she’s a hard worker, but my grandparent’s really were the ones that laid the foundation for the man I am today.”**

Wade is a Junior Business Administration major with a concentration in Management, and a minor in fashion merchandising. His campus involvement included his role as a Resident Assistant, University Fellow working with First-Year Students, Director of Student Affairs for the Student Government Association, and President of The Brotherhood La Hermandad.

### *College Selection Process*

Wade's story began with his affinity and love for his family. His family's support had been the catalyst for his desire to attain his college degree as he wanted to give back to them. He shared

The reason why I wanted to get a college degree is to make a difference, not just to make a difference, but make a difference within my family. They are the ones that motivate me because seeing them work hard 24/7 inspires me, and it's like, how do I give back?

Wade explained that earning his degree will allow him to pay them back and shared "but what will be my biggest way to pay them back and my family is a type, that they don't want nothing in return, they just want me to be successful." Wade grew up in Hillside, NJ, with his mother and his maternal grandparents. This was clearly illustrated in his annal and chronicle as the first box in his graphic which was an important piece to his story. He added the year of each of these important moments so his graphic was a mix of both the annal and chronicle. See figure 6 for a graphic representation of Wade's annal and chronicle.

His background is African American and Latino; his mother was born in Angola, Africa, and his father was born in Medellin, Colombia. He praises his family for inspiring him to get his college degree and described his educational experience in middle school and high school as positive ones. Wade had always considered himself a "scholar." Thus, attaining his college degree was always the plan. He described his experience growing up with his mother and grandparents as a bit strict. Still, he believed it was necessary during that time and appreciated the support and encouragement he had growing up. He shared

But because I was living under a strict household and going to college and making that decision and dorm was a game-changer for me. Because not only was I by myself, but I was, quote unquote, freed from the chains of my mom or grandparents whom I live with. And don't get me wrong, I love them. And I'm thankful for them for keeping me under just a bit. But there were moments in which I felt as though I deserved a little bit of light. And when I came to college, I took advantage of all the freedom I got. And I cannot be more thankful.

However, this experience led Wade to want to attend college a bit farther from home as he wanted to explore the world outside of Hillside, NJ, and, most importantly, gain a bit of freedom from his family. Wade's high school was diverse, with a majority of the students being African American and Latino. However, Wade welcomed the opportunity to get to know other students from different backgrounds than what he was used to as it made him step out of his comfort zone. He shared

And when I was able to broaden myself and get to know people from different backgrounds besides the one that I'm comfortable with, it made me feel different as a student, it made the student experience complete for me, as opposed to when I went to Hillside High School.

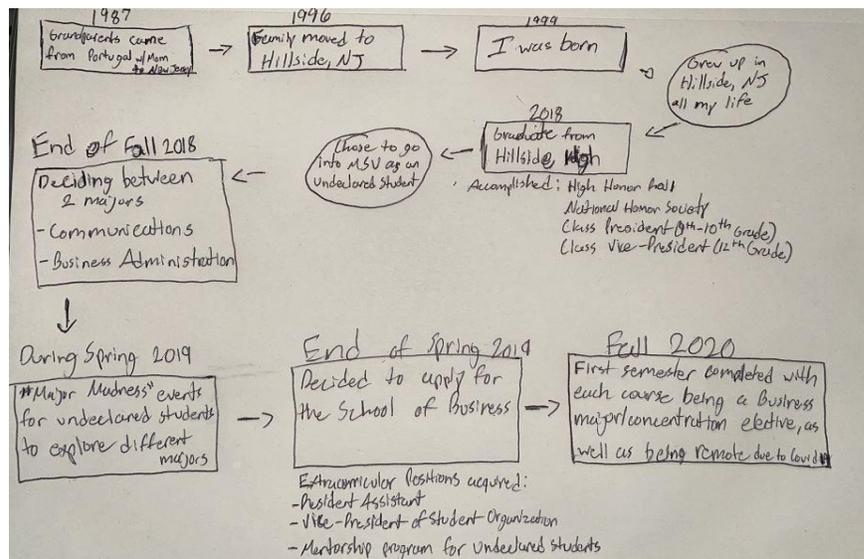
Wade's experiences in high school influenced how he approached his college selection process, and ultimately how he decided to attend SSU. And although Wade drew his annal and chronicle during the interview, albeit a bit hesitant at first, he decided to focus on his past accomplishments leading up to college. See figure 6 for a graphic representation of Wade's annal and chronicle. He shared

And my handwriting is not the best, so I'm trying to write as big as possible. I will write, like educational accomplishments.. Ok I am just adding to my educational successes when I was in High School. It's crazy, because I just don't think about high school as often so it's like, I gotta remember, I gotta reflect.

The picture below is Wade's annal and chronicle and includes a timeline of dates and moments that explain his family's arrival to the US and his journey from middle school, high school, and college. It also describes pivotal moments in his major selection journey. See figure 6 for Wade's graphic representation of his annal and chronicle.

**Figure 6**

*Wade's Annal and Chronicle*



Additionally, Wade's annal and chronicle were chronological and began with his grandparent's journey to the US from Portugal. He also listed leadership activities and accomplishments he participated in while in high school. He specifically shared

During the spring of 2019. The major madness events for the class students to explore different majors occurred. That was something that I felt was a key part of my journey. And at the end of spring 19, I decided to apply for the School of Business. Some extracurricular positions that were acquired within that semester there were the resident assistant position, being the Vice President for Student org, and the mentorship program for students, which was the university fellows. His drive to be involved and continue developing leadership skills carried into his college career, where he also highlighted his various leadership positions.

### ***Selecting a Major***

Wade's journey to selecting a major began his senior year of high school when he applied to different colleges. He explained that he applied to five other schools in New Jersey and usually selected majors in Education, Business, majors related to Sports management, and Fashion. He did not necessarily know what exact major he wanted, but he gravitated towards majors in those disciplines. He explained "so I obviously had no like, lane, no direction, I didn't know where I wanted to go...when it came down to cracking down on the decision for a major, I was still unsure." It was not until he had a conversation with his guidance counselor that he realized that he did not have to select a major when applying to schools; he could go in as undecided. On his annal and chronicle, Wade noted that he applied to SSU as an undeclared student and also included that he was in between two majors, as illustrated in figure 6. Wade initially chose Fashion Studies at SSU because he had a slight interest in fashion in high school, but it was not a passion for him. He explained

I remember calling the admissions office like can I change my major from fashion studies to undecided the um, the history behind fashion studies real quick is growing up in high school fashion was a thing of mine interest of mine, a slight interest, nothing very like, like, I'm passionate for- something I love getting involved with. So that's why I just applied for it, for fashion studies just because, just because they had it, like, I was like, oh, it caught my eye. But that wasn't what I wanted to do. So I ended up making a decision of going in undecided.

Wade described his major exploration process as a very thoughtful one that began during his freshman orientation when he attended a separate session for undecided students. The session was designed as an exploration program for undecided students, which gave them options and tracks for different academic programs across the various schools. Wade also explained that his Academic Advisor, who was also his first-year seminar instructor, was extremely vital to helping him choose a major. He described his experience as “thankfully, I was blessed with my advisor. Not just to be my advisor, but to be my New Student seminar teacher. My main man, he held me down. He gave me a lot of information.”

Wade was intentional about researching majors and attended programs and activities that helped him make an informed decision. He set the goal early on that he would declare a major by the end of his freshman year. Wade used his resources very well and explained that although he did seek assistance from his advisor, he also did the work. He shared

But one thing I can say is, that and the last time, the most recent time we spoke, he told me, and it really like stuck out to me. He said, um, don't just think that,

you know, because I was your advisor. It wasn't just me giving you that assistance, you know, you were hungry to learn more, you were willing, you were putting yourself out there. I generally forgot that. I was really trying to get my major. I was really trying to choose a major. Like, it wasn't just him doing all the dirty work.

Wade attended a series of fairs held at each of the different schools, which allowed him to learn more about the other majors, which helped him decide between Business and Communication Arts, the two majors he was in between. He explained

So I went in with a mission. I said, I'm gonna go at all, it was like five fairs. I went to School Business one; it was the first one. And when I came out of that, that building, after that fair, the major madness for the school of business, I already knew I'm going into business like, like, like it's happening. I knew it.

Additionally, Wade also took courses related to business and communications as per his advisor's recommendation. This, coupled with his research and participation in the major exploration process, helped him solidify his choices. In the end, Wade decided to major in Business Administration with a concentration in Management and also added a minor in Fashion Merchandising. He was able to infuse both areas he liked and choose programs that complimented each other. He was very confident with his choice and explained and by April, I was able to successfully be confident, like I was able to be confident that, okay, I'm a business major. Like my freshman year is coming to an end. And I'm a business major.

### *Self-Efficacy and Sense of Belonging*

Wade described his experience at SSU as very good. Therefore, he had been able to have very fruitful experiences during this time at SSU, mainly due to his thirst for knowledge and experiences. He explained

My experience has been very good. I feel as though it is what I needed in my life.

The experience outside of the classroom is what has made me more motivated for the experience inside the classroom.

Wade explained that although the semester had been remote due to COVID, he had great professors who had been able to deliver the content in engaging ways, impacting his sense of belonging and self-efficacy in the major. He described one example as follows

She is not only a motivator, when only a professor, but she's a motivator. And she's somebody that's willing to help us willing to see us succeed, and have us understand the critical topics of what it's like to be an organization, what is leadership, whether it's diversity, whether it's the culture, she always went out of her way to always give us you know, these assignments that require us to develop our professional lives in order to work together, in organization work together in a team, all that and I give her credit to, because not only do we have her via Zoom, but she was still able to put her message out there and have us understand it throughout an hour of class, you know, those are just two, for example, the two classes that I definitely took away from.

He enthusiastically shared how fortunate he has been to cultivate meaningful relationships with many staff members at SSU, some with higher-level positions, and

who have influenced him and mentored him. He described one example of being mentored by the Dean of one of the colleges as follows

He became my mentor and we spoke a few times at the end of my freshman year, that's when I joined the program. We spoke a few times and in those conversations, there were a lot of takeaways from it and it made me think like, yo, he's taking time out of his day, to speak with me as a guide, and give me some sort of guidance. And it was just like, it's a matter of me, not only maintaining the relationship, but making sure that we both engage with each other. He had a lot going on, you know, he's a whole Dean, so I'm just like, No, you got a lot going on,, I don't want to take away your time. He'll always be like no no, you are not taking my time, I am here for you. And I was just like wow. I was just astounded by the fact that he's the whole Dean. I had the impression that, oh, the higher the position, the less time you have. But he was very genuine, he was very true to his word. And that was another person who I had a great takeaway from.

Moreover, Wade had a real passion for helping others and expressed his interest in pursuing further education by obtaining his Master's degree and perhaps a doctorate in Education. Although he was not yet sure of the route he wanted to take, he did note that one of his mentors opened his eyes to the prospect of earning a Masters in Public Administration, so that is an option he was currently exploring. His ability to connect with staff and administrators, namely men of color, had given him confidence and a lot of insight into future opportunities outside of business. These connections also impacted his sense of belonging. He explained

That's something that crossed my mind recently, I'm speaking to one of the associate directors from EOF here, and he got his Masters of Public Administration. He was the first person I've ever seen before. So I was just like what's all that about. I had a curiosity. And when he explained it, I was just like, Okay, this might, you know, this is on the list; this is one of my options now, because at first I was thinking, I'll just take the business route. But that crossed my mind too. It's an experience, I want to try it out.

He also had an affinity for fostering great relationships with his peers, and often described them as having influenced him in many ways. He explained that many of them have taken him under their wing and motivated him to get involved on campus and take on more leadership roles. He explicitly highlighted former campus leaders who served in positions of leadership in some of the clubs and organizations he was a part of and shared the following

He made a great impact on my college experience from the moment I stepped in. I wasn't a part of the EOF program, but he was. And when we connected, it was through the organization that I am currently the president for, The Brotherhood La Hermandad. And he was the vice president at the time, that's when I really got to know him, and we clicked because we shared common interests. And from that moment forward. He had me under his wing, so to say, yeah, me and two of my other friends, and we became a unit, and even though he ended up going to student government. He was the reason why I chose to join brotherhood. And now, I'm the president of the Brotherhood.

Overall, Wade's story illustrated the importance of family, networking, peer support, mentorship, and motivation. Wade was an example of a hard-working, driven, and motivated student leader. He was thoughtful in his approach to what he will do in the future, carefully selecting experiences that enhanced his resume and motivated him to do well socially and academically. His story highlighted the essence of why campus involvement and mentorship go hand in hand with developing a sense of belonging, which also translated into confidence and belief in his abilities, which are needed to attain self-efficacy. His enthusiasm to mentor and be a good role model for other students shows just how dedicated he was not only to his success but the success of others.

### **Tony's Story**

**"That's like the American dream... And I kind of believe it. I know it's not for everyone, but I buy into the idea. You go to college and you get a degree."**

Tony is a Cuban male is a Junior majoring in Language, Business, and Culture with a concentration in Spanish. He also had a minor in Psychology. Tony decided on attending SSU once recruited to join the Swim Team. His campus involvement included participating in the Student Government Association, serving as a University College Fellow, and serving as a Resident Assistant. In addition, he was also part of a non-profit organization called Voice Leaders.

### ***College Selection Process***

Tony's story began with how he evolved from being a recruited student-athlete on the swim team to becoming a passionate student leader. He explained that while he really enjoyed swimming, he felt that something was missing after about a year. He shared

And I felt like I wanted to do something more school-related, I wanted to become like, good at that, I wanted to become good at school, I really wanted to get involved, and see how good I could get, I just want to challenge myself. So I decided to quit the swim team and try to get more involved in school.

Tony realized that he wanted to take full advantage of all the opportunities that SSU offered and decided to join various clubs and organizations. He also explained that once he decided to quit the swim team, becoming involved on campus made his experience at SSU much better and helped him build more confidence. He explained

I don't know just being so involved and like not just staying in my room, because I dorm too, not staying in my room but like socializing and getting to know other students and really being on the go all the time. And it changed my perspective because I have friends that are not as involved. So I can see how their experiences and my experiences are very different. I think that also made me more comfortable approaching my professors and like having relationships with them.

Tony recounted his immigrant experience, having left Cuba at eleven years old to live in Spain for six months before moving to Miami and finally settling in New Jersey. He lived with his mother because his parents were divorced but he was very close to his grandparents because they helped raise him. Retrospectively, Tony explained that his experience living in Spain catalyzed his affinity for what would later become his major: Language, Business, and Culture.

I feel like that was the start of everything because back in Cuba I didn't know what I wanted to do. I was like a little kid, and going to Spain, I think, gave me that cultural perspective or like another culture like European culture.

Tony's annal and chronicle were typed and presented in a linear way. He explained how the experience of leaving Cuba shaped aspects of his life related to language and culture, which later we both realized was foreshadowing his major choice. He shares

So the first one I put was moved from Cuba to Spain at 11 years old. I feel like that was the start of everything because back in Cuba I didn't know what I wanted to do. I was like a little kid, and going to Spain, I think, gave me like that like cultural perspective or like another culture like European culture. And it was still Spanish but it was in Catalonia, but I completely forgot the language. Okay, it gave me like a whole different perspective, like the European perspective. Then I moved from Spain to Miami and that was the language, like shock. The new language I was completely lost.

The picture below illustrates Tony's annal and chronicle, a linear timeline of key moments in his earlier life living abroad. The annal and chronicle also highlight how old he was during certain events. He also includes some of the steps he took in his major exploration process. See figure 7 for Tony's graphic representation of his annal and chronicle.

**Figure 7**

*Tony's Annal and Chronicle*



While Tony's mother was on a medical mission for Cuba, his grandparents raised him for four years until they reunited in Miami. He explained “my grandparents are like my second parents. My mom left Cuba when I was like eight or nine years old.” Tony praised his mother for instilling the importance of pursuing an education. Tony's mother was the first person in his family to get a college education. Therefore, he grew up with the expectation that he would also have to attend college. He explains

So coming from family, my mom, she's the first one to have like a college education. And my grandparents didn't. I just kind of grew up always with that expectation for me, I guess from her to like, go to college and get a degree like

from her. Yeah. That's like the American dream. Like I guess like for her that's like, the way to go. And I kind of believe it in. I know it's not for everyone, but I kind of like buy into the idea. You go to college and you get a degree.

Tony also explained that while in High School, he was very focused on going to college for swimming and was intentional about finding schools with swim teams. He had not yet realized how much more he would get out of being involved in extracurricular activities and leadership opportunities until he got to SSU.

So I didn't know-how like the whole school perspective as in how much fun it will be to like be involved in the school to become a student leader. So senior year high school, I was interested in finding a college that I could swim in. So I started emailing coaches to different universities.

He contacted the coach at SSU and was recruited to join the swim team. He explained the process of landing at SSU as

But Yeah, but SSU actually at first, they didn't want me at first. But then towards the end, I got like, really good. I got dropped a lot of the time. And then the coach emailed to say he actually wanted me. So I always liked SSU. I came to SSU once for high school for swimming. So I kind of liked it. And I have some friends that we're going there. So I heard really nice things about it. And it was kind of close to my house. So I felt like it felt, it fit perfectly to what I wanted. And I wanted to swim and the team was good, so I think this was a good fit.

### *Selecting a Major*

Tony began at SSU as an undeclared student, and while he had some ideas of what he may have wanted to do, he admitted his mom's background as a doctor in Cuba gave him some pressure to choose the medical profession. He stated

But I think I was undecided and my mom was a doctor in Cuba. Like I always had like that on me. Like oh that would be so nice if I could be a doctor like my mom. But I never really felt like a passion for it and like I knew what it was just like, you know, like oh my mom was a doctor, like it'd be nice. I just never had a passion for either. I liked history a lot. I just knew what I liked, but I wasn't sure what I wanted to do.

Tony's journey towards selecting a major was extensive and began with exploring majors in biology and psychology. His process included taking assessments, taking courses in different sciences, as well as attending club and organization meetings related to biology and pre-med. However, he did not feel that going the biology and pre-med route was for him. He describes his experience as follows

Every time I would go to a meeting, everyone would be so depressed and I was like I don't want to do this. And I don't know, besides, I really didn't know what I wanted. The whole time I was in the transition of finding what that major was. I always felt like I wanted to be really sure about my decision because I felt like once I made it, like, I want to stick to it. So I tried to get as much information as I could, as comfortable as I could, with my decision. So yeah, I think that's kind of what led me to try to do all those things like all those like different assessments, talk to my advisor a lot of times, talk to professors. Doing all that was just like,

make sure that I was comfortable with my decision and that is what I wanted to do.

He later decided to apply for an internship with the New Jersey Governor's Fellows Program. He shared that while the program was cancelled due to COVID-19, it was later modified to include some virtual sessions. These sessions exposed him to meet different people and learn tips about resumes, interviewing, and etiquette. Additionally, he shared that he was allowed to work on a marketing plan that directly exposed him to business. He explained

Oh, you know, this partner was like, if you guys wanted to, we could actually give you the opportunity to work on this project for my company. And I was like wait, this like, totally relates to what I'm doing from a major. He wanted us to create a marketing plan for his company for Latin America products that he worked on. So I literally jumped in on it and yea, it lasted three weeks. It was really challenging and it was fun. And in the end I was really part of what we did.

It was evident that internships were very beneficial towards helping him solidify his choice of majoring in Language, Business, and Culture. Additionally, his goal was to go into finance, and he felt that the major coupled with his concentration in Spanish had adequately prepared him to pursue careers in finance. He explained

Okay. So something I really like, And I mean I would like to go into finance. But I would like to go into a Spanish Bank. Ok and I think that this major really prepares me for that. Because it gives me that cultural aspect and like it gives me that like conversation, like starting a topic that I can talk about. Not only am I a business major, but I have also like the cultural background I have like this

language background that can like help me and it's has prepared me for all the like cultures like specifically the Spanish culture the Latin American Hispanic culture. I've also with the experience I gained this summer, I've also feel very prepared. And I think my courses have prepared me so far this semester. This semester, I took an Excel spreadsheet course and I think before I was familiar with excel, but this year, I feel like I'm really good.

Tony's background and cultural experiences provided him a solid foundation in the major he selected, and his strong academic self-efficacy is also evident based on how well he did in his courses.

### ***Self-Efficacy and Sense of Belonging***

Tony did feel a strong sense of belonging to SSU and in particular, with his major and role as a University Fellow. And although Tony felt very connected to both his major and minor, he did not necessarily feel like he belonged more to one than the other. He shared "I think my major, yeah, if it's not my majors, also my job as University College fellow, I feel really connected to those two things. Like really connected." He believed he had formed relationships with professors from both the Language, Business, and Culture major and the Spanish concentration. He shared

I feel like I really connected with my business professors- so it's like half and half.

Yea I don't know. So I also connected really well with my Spanish professors

because my concentration is in my Spanish.

Tony also explained that he strongly connected with his cultural background and identified as "full Cuban." He shared that he has many friends, both Latino and none, and often, conversations began with talking about his background. He explained that while he

did not have any issues navigating SSU or his major as a Latino male, he shared some interesting and somewhat negative experiences while he was on the swim team and said

What I could tell you, though, I could tell you that in my swim team experiences, I did feel really out of place, because I was the only Latino, like, person on the team. So it was really different. Because I feel like with my major, like, Yes, I've gotten to know people from the major, but I don't think I've gotten to know them as close as I got to know my teammates that one year. Yeah, we practiced every single day, we'll go to hotels sports tournaments, you know, we would spend a lot of time together. So like in the locker room too. I don't know, I mean, being a Latino in the swim team was definitely like an experience that, like, outcast. But at the same time, like I could, I could fit in as like that Latino person, like the Latino kid.

Tony's involvement on campus provided him with a rich and diverse experience that he spoke fondly of. His role as a senator on the SGA gave him insight into the voting process and how students were empowered to host so many different programs and events for their respective clubs. He explained

So it was really nice. I feel like I was doing a really good job. It was really interesting to see like all the like students points of view. And what I liked the most was like every week, students would come to like, get funds for their clubs and stuff like that. And it was just really interesting to see all the different things that they were doing. I knew we obviously have things in our school because it's a state university so it will obviously have a lot of organizations and clubs. But to see every single day like all those different clubs and all the things they do, how

many things we can offer to like the students in our schools was really interesting to see.

Additionally, he enjoyed the opportunity to help mentor and support first-year students through their major selection process in his role as University College fellow. He shared

I don't know if it's just, it makes me feel really good when you can help a student who was in the same position as you, who likes having some struggles and you kind of have been through it already. And you're like, hey, I've been there already.

Tony explained that he had utilized all the campus resources available to him, like tutoring, the writing center, and working with his advisor. Moreover, in addition to finding most advisors at the advising center very helpful, Tony specifically commended his Academic advisor for helping him with different aspects of his experience at SSU.

He shared

My advisor helped me a lot for my RA interview. And for my interview for the New Jersey's governor's fellow program. She helped me so much. With my first job as a university fellow, she helped me with that. Preparing for interviews, helping me with my application for the New Jersey center of Hispanic policy and regional development. For my RA application for my RA interview, like she's really been always there for me for anything.

Tony's past experiences acclimating to learning different dialects of Spanish and learning the English language were interwoven into his story and gave him rich perspectives. He described his experiences with language in various phases of his life: In Spain, in Miami, and in New Jersey as follows

And it was still Spanish but it was in, it was in Catalonia, so it was Catalan actually but I spoke there, I completely forgot the language. Okay, it gave me like a whole different perspective, like the European perspective. Then I moved from Spain to Miami and that was the language, like shock. The new language I was completely lost, I remember it was the first day of school. I remember feeling so lost, like not knowing anything that was going on around me. And after that I got used to it I found some friends, some Cuban friends that we didn't speak in English. We spoke in Spanish. But in Miami I sort of learned a little bit of English. I thought I knew English until I came to New Jersey and I had to speak it all the time and then I realized I didn't know any English. I remember my first day of practice for my swim team, the coach was speaking to me. And I couldn't understand what he was saying. I tried to speak to him in English and the coach was like, oh he tried to find somebody in the team to be the interpreter and I was like okay, I needed to have an interpreter.

Moreover, Tony's experiences with culture and language had been instrumental in helping him develop a passion for his major and building the confidence needed to excel in his academics, thus increasing his levels of self-efficacy.

Yeah, that's why I thought. This major was so good for me. It was like such a good fit for my life and like what I've been through and like my interest in business. So I thought like oh culturally into like Latin America Hispanic culture, and also Spanish which has been like part of my life my whole life and you know it's like you said, it's been like coming back always to me. So Yeah, I do think about that.

Overall, Tony's story demonstrated how every experience in one's life can play a role in dictating their future. Tony was a hard-working, passionate, and driven young man. His rich cultural background and thirst for knowledge and involvement have given him a great college experience and prepared him to embark on his journey in his major. Tony had been thoughtful and intentional about what he did, carefully crafting relationships and choosing experiences that would enhance his resume and motivate him to do well socially and academically.

### **Sharpe's Story**

**"At a certain point, I didn't have time for my dreams, I kind of just came to, I grew up within a matter of a couple of months."**

Sharpe is a Ghanaian male who is a Junior studying Business Administration with a concentration in Finance. His campus involvement included his role as a Resident Assistant and former role as a University College Fellow. Sharpe lived with his mother, father, two sisters, and his grandmother. He was the second of his siblings to attend college, the oldest having first attended a prestigious university in New York City.

Sharpe's story began with his recollection of what life was like at SSU before COVID. He vividly remembered how active the campus was before the pandemic and how he was able to cultivate relationships with fellow students and all different types of employees at the university. The impact of COVID-19 had impacted Sharpe tremendously, as it was clear that he valued the vibrant community at SSU. He shared

So I think I've seen so many different departments and getting to know all the people of Sam's place, even just the dining halls, but it's so crazy, because, you know, just the other day, someone from Sam's place, they passed away. And someone on the shuttle passed away.

Sharpe's background with working for Residence Life and as a former University Fellow led him to become well acquainted with the campus community, and he thrived off seeing the campus in all its glory.

And, overall, it's crazy, because I would say that, I feel like I have really seen every aspect of the university from working with the fellows, you know, pre COVID, to working with res life, you know, seeing how it is before the COVID happened... it's so surreal to see how, at one point, you look at a quad. And it's got 100-200 people...and, you know, you would have all these parties in the quad, and you would have all these black events. And then in another year, you walk by the same quad, and it's just nothing, you just hear wind, like you would never wind before. You sit there and you look and there's just nobody there. Same thing with the residence. You go from so many students at once. And constantly being on your two feet, constantly speaking to people interacting, and then all of a sudden, you kind of feel like useless in a way you kind of see like this, this, it just becomes a building where there's not that many students and usually there are students who are people who can't be at home because they live very, very far away.

Sharpe valued forming connections with people, and not just his peers but everyone on the SSU campus. Sharpe flourished off of the campus environment, which was quite evident since that is how he began his story.

### ***College Selection Process***

While Sharpe explained that he faced his own set of challenges during his time at SSU, especially his freshman and sophomore year, he shifted his story to go back to

when things took a turn for his family in terms of their finances. Sharpe described what it felt like to watch his family struggle with finances while he was in high school. Although his parents were college-educated in Ghana, his older sister was the first to attend college. Her experience attending a costly school was the catalyst to some of the financial hardships his family experienced. He shared

It was my last year of middle school. So I believe that'd be 2014. And it was very hard for her- long story short. She went. And there were a lot of people coming from other countries, it is a very diverse school. So they get people from all over. New York is considered the center of the world- it is not one of the Ivy League's, but they might as well consider one with the tuition alone. She was paying around 60,000 a year. Because she was the first one to go. And it was out of state, it wasn't in state, she didn't get a lot of benefits. So right off the bat, she did two years there. And classes are extremely difficult, she went for computer science or engineering, actually you know it was computer science. It was extremely difficult. She used to call me when I was in high school, like hey this college thing is tough. And I think that definitely also really started putting more pressure on me to do other things as well.

Sharpe's annal and chronicle were also linear. However, his timeline began with one of the most pivotal moments in his life, as described above. He described the impact his sister's college experience had on his family, and in particular, how it landed his father in debt.

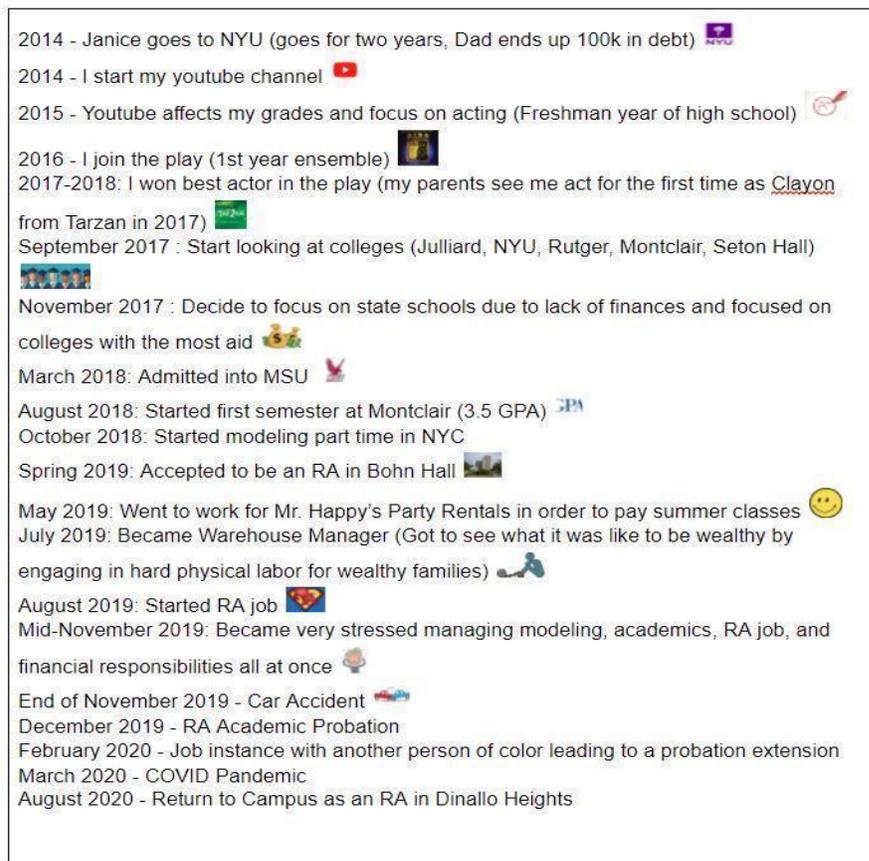
So I started off with my sister going to college in 2014. That played a huge role in terms of our debt and making decisions. So in 2014, that is when, my sister went

to NYU, she went for two years, and then my dad ended up 100,000 in debt. And then in 2014, that kind of pushed me to try and start, you know, figuring out ways to make some income. So I started my YouTube channel.

The figure that follows is a picture of Sharpe's annal and chronicle, which included dates for many major life events. He placed symbols and images near each item as a visual descriptor, making the annal and chronicle stand out. See figure 8 for Sharpe's graphic representation of his annal and chronicle.

## Figure 8

### *Sharpe's Annal and Chronicle*



Sharpe's journey with selecting a college was further complicated when his father lost his job during his junior year. This, coupled with the expenses brought on by paying out-of-state tuition for his sister's education, left the family stretched thin regarding money. The pressure for Sharpe to perform was evident since, unfortunately, his sister faced some challenges transitioning to college, leaving his family with residual debt. He explained

We didn't have the money, simply put, my dad was unemployed. So well, I think at this time he was still employed, but we still didn't have the money. So we took out a lot of loans, to pay for the first year and the second year. So eventually, we ended up almost 100,000 in debt. My dad, because my dad was the one that took out the loan in my sister's name because she couldn't take it out for itself. Imagine like my dad is \$100,000 in debt of course, he has his job, he doesn't know that two years later, he's about to lose the job.

Sharpe's career aspirations while in high school led him to consider dropping out to pursue acting and YouTube endeavors full-time. However, while he was passionate about acting, his inspiration for getting a college degree was due to his parents instilling solid Christian values and reiterating that it's essential to have a backup plan and a strong foundation in education. He stated "and my parents really, really ingrained in me just how important the foundation of just having a degree was saying that, you know, it's always great to have a backup plan."

Sharpe recalled how he had to put his YouTube channel aside because it affected his academic performance and his parents had a high expectation that he would maintain good grades. For Sharpe, attending college was not necessarily a choice but an

expectation as there was a strong emphasis on continuing education in African culture.

He shared

Ok so in African culture, it is just like, you have to go to college. They go straight from the boarding school and they go straight to college. A lot of times they go to be doctors, lawyers. ... And, you know, if you get a C you know, with African parents at a young age, it's like, the world is going crazy. So I had to kind of just put YouTube to the side.

Although Sharpe had a passion for the arts and wanted to prove to his parents that he was a talented actor, and after watching him perform, while they did agree that he was good, they did not support him attending college to pursue an Arts degree. He shared

So when it came to going to college, it was just me thinking one thing and it was my parents thinking of another thing. And ultimately, I went with the safer option. And another reason I went with the safer option was because I was fine going in undeclared. In my - in high school, I was a good student. I was a really, really great student in math and sciences. So I didn't want to throw away like my brains part of it. So it was like, if I have that talent, I can't just put it to the side, you know, I mean, I have to use it in some way. So I said, you know what, let me get this degree. And obviously, I have other passions and other talents. But those are things that may be try once I'm done, let me at least get the degree, get that foundation so that I have the best of both worlds. So that's how, ultimately I ended up going to college. And choosing college life instead of going right into the acting Business.

Sharpe ultimately decided to put aside his dreams of pursuing a career in acting to pursue a more practical degree because he knew his family was limited financially and could not pay for too many college application fees. After speaking with his mother, they decided he would only apply to state schools so that he was able to qualify for financial aid. He explained

So, I remember, I was looking at colleges because we didn't have a lot of money for the applications. My mom basically just came and said to me, Listen, you gotta narrow it down to, you know, the ones you think you're gonna get into. Obviously, it would be great if you could apply to all of them, and then just take a chance. But we were not in that position. Other families are, but we're not. So I really just focused on the state schools. And that was very disappointing thing for me. Only because, especially after performing so well, in the play, you know, I had these students going to art schools here, and everyone was like, oh, where are you going? Where are you going? And obviously, performing very well in school as well. Everyone was like, Oh, where are you going? You going to Ivy League? For me it was just like, everyone was very excited to see where I would go. So to kind of just be like, Oh, you know, i'm going a state school, you know, where everybody else was going.

While at SSU, he felt that he needed to find opportunities that would allow him to lessen the financial burden on his parents, which led him to apply to become a Resident Assistant. He shared

I think that also put a lot of pressure on me to be the one to perform. So there wasn't a lot of room for me to be like, oh, well, I want to be an actor, or I want to

do this now. You know, at that point, it was just, especially once my dad went unemployed, it was like, now everything's breaking loose. Now, it's just my mom. So my mom, you know, her opinion really, really mattered to me at the time, because it was like I saw how hard she was working..and it was just all of us. With a lot of it was this person needs a bill, it was me, I may need a fee to submit my college essay. You know, my little sister needs something for a field trip, and she just did not have the cash. They just did not have the cash, it was really important on me to step up and kind of find those leadership positions and find those grants. So I think that definitely played a role in, you know, what I chose to do. And that also played a role in why I ended up becoming an RA as well. Just trying to take off the debt.

Sharpe's experience with financial hardship prior to attending college, was what shaped how navigated his college experience. Not having financial freedom altered the path he took to select a college and limited his chances of attending an Ivy League college, like he hoped. However, in his story he shared that he was able to navigate some of those financial challenges, by making very clear and calculated decisions while he was at SSU, like applying to become a Resident Assistant.

### ***Selecting a Major***

Sharpe's experiences before attending college served as a reminder that he would need to choose a major that would give him more career options that would provide stability. Therefore he sought out his guidance counselor's advice to find out which majors had the best return on their investment; in other words, which major was going to "make the most money." He explained

I remember going to my guidance counselor. I said can I ask you something. I was like, out of all these things, which one sounds like it would make the most money. Because at the time, I'm just thinking, I'm like, I need to help my mom, like at this point, whatever it is, it just has to be something that's going to provide the finances. At a certain point I was, I didn't have time for my dreams, I kind of just came to, I grew up within a matter of a couple months.

Sharpe's guidance counselor shared that business majors tend to be more lucrative career options and asked him to reflect on why he would choose this major. Sharpe admitted he did not necessarily want to do it but knew he could do it if he had to. Ultimately, he decided applying as an undeclared major would provide more flexibility in trying different courses in a variety of majors. He shared

So I came in and even though I knew I kind of wanted to do Business, I was like, you know what, let me be smart. And do that, undeclared. I mean, obviously, people come in with their gen eds all the time. I have how many gen eds to do. This year, there's no rush, obviously. And I said, one thing that I did was I was smart in the way that I took gen ed classes that in the case that I picked Finance, they would roll over to Finance, so the microeconomics and the macro. And then one of my gen eds for my arts. I took theater, so I was kind of just -I was being smart with the way I planned my gen eds, so I could get a little dabble in everything before making my decision.

Later, when he took a microeconomics course and had a great experience with a professor, he knew he wanted to major in Business. Although he was a bit unsure about which concentration of Business he wanted to choose. He shared

I was set on Business, but for me the problem was picking the concentration. Because I took micro and I was like, I could do economics, economics is cool. But a lot of people will find internships, they usually go for finance majors. In that particular internship I was going for. I wanted to be around banking or some type of investment banking internship. So I know that my friend does management, management was also something that I was thinking about too, I was a very good leader. So I was like, man, I mean, management as well. And I was just going in my degree works and I was calculating like, which one would I finish earlier on. But also when it came to finance, I really wanted the internship. Ultimately, his uncle's mentorship and personal experience working on Wall Street influenced Sharpe's decision to choose the finance concentration. He shared

So for me, freshman year, when I was choosing a major, he was the mentor for me, because he was the only person that I knew that could, that had been through the business route, obviously, my dad, he was an auditor used to audit big companies. My mom was an accountant as well. But in terms of- they were doing it in Ghana...What I wanted to do is what he was doing- Wall Street in New York City. Business presentations, that's what I wanted to be. So that's what I looked at him. I was like, Okay, if you've had the experience with the American schools, what do you know, that I need to know? And he said to me, listen, when you're going for the degree, management is cool. But they want finance majors, that is what they're really, really looking for. Investment Banking in big places. It's easier to find a job. So that kind of played a role, so I was like ok economics is cool, but Finance is what I need to be doing.

Although Sharpe was satisfied with his choice of major, he was not immersed in the business community because he was focused on working and making money. He was very involved in his RA position, and this took most of his time and attention.

Additionally, Sharpe struggled with time management and balancing all the different things he was involved with, like the RA job, the fellow's position, and his modeling career, which led him to work runway shows in NYC. It was after he got into a car accident that he knew he needed to make some changes. He explained

And eventually school- I kind of found myself in a position where school was becoming like the last of everything. And that was when I had my lowest academic performance as well. So at that time, I was just super, super stressed. I got in a car accident that fall. The Fall right before the COVID so I remember I got a car accident and I think while I was in the hospital, the moment that really kinda just - I was working crazy, and I was in the hospital bed, and my mom came up to me and I am like Mom, I have to go to school.. I have to go. Why are you in such a hurry? They took an X-ray and were scanning for internal bleeding. And I was like I have to put on my RA board. I have to get my board. I have like three things due tomorrow. If they are late- I just can't. And my mom is like you are about to die...my mom is like, you were literally just in a life and death situation and that is what you are thinking about and that's really just where my mind was. I was so stressed...So in terms of the finance community, I was never really like, I never really got the time to enjoy being what I was, it was just more like, one of those things where it came second fiddle to everything else.

Sharpe also recalled when he needed to take a summer class to keep the RA position because he was short on credits. He explained that he found a job listing for a party rental company and decided to apply. He explained that the job was a bit of culture shock and he had a learning curve, but it eventually turned into a great learning experience for him and impacted his leadership and maturity. He shared

So I called the guy up. His name is Jay, my boss. And I would say that he has a major impact on who I am. I saw things that I liked about him and I saw the things I did not like and value in terms of a leadership role.... so my boss, he was one of those people that - and my boss was a millionaire. But he was one of those people that he knew what it was like to be at the top. But he also knew what it was like to be at the very bottom as well. And he kind of also shaped the way that I viewed college. And what I wanted to be later on.

Sharpe had become more invested in his major, and his future aspirations involved applying for internships in investment banking and exploring the area of Real Estate. He had become interested in budgeting and had been learning about the stock market, something he credits the pandemic for as it forced him to pay a closer look at his finances. He shared

I would say that, like, the good thing with the pandemic is, and I would even go as far as to say that before the pandemic, I wasn't as connected to the major as I am now. Only because the pandemic really forced me personally to take a step back and look at my finances and how to budget. So I was watching a lot of videos on how to invest and how to build up your credit score and how to rent our properties and how to make income because obviously I needed income during the time.

And I learned a lot about just the stock market and short term investments versus long term investments and how to grow your wealth over time and also in the short term. So I was trying it out in my own life with my own money.

In many ways, Sharpe's experiences with money due to his father's debt had a significant impact on why he chose to major in finance, as he knew that his future and quality of life depended on him finding a major that would lead to a lucrative career.

### ***Self-Efficacy and Sense of Belonging***

When describing his academic focus and how confident he felt in his studies, Sharpe discussed how he found motivation to succeed by setting goals and sticking with them, even when things got hard. He shared

But I would say that the timeline has kind of been my motivation to basically succeed in most of the classes, just really setting a goal for myself. And sticking to the goal that I had in the very beginning to finish in a certain amount of time, knowing that if I drop, it was going to be difficult to try and make it. So I would say the timeline is kind of what I use as motivation and low moments.

Additionally, Sharpe explained that he felt confident in his classes the more he could connect with the faculty teaching that particular course. He found it helpful when his professors could break down the material by providing real-world examples, which helped increase his self-efficacy and gave him the ability to master the material and ultimately do well. He shared

I didn't feel like I was talking to a computer. He basically just broke it down. He was kind of like listen, do you really want to be doing this when you're gonna lose this. He would use real life examples and talk about you know, like, there's really

no such thing as a discount like you go into a store you see 50% off and right away your eyes say I need to buy this. And once I learned it all. It was so crazy, and that's what I really like about people, like that they use real life. Things I can relate to. Some people just read straight from the textbook, but he was one of those professors. He would use average examples. I can really just say like, Okay, I get what you're saying.

When describing his relationship with faculty and those he connected with, he felt most comfortable with one faculty member in particular because he looked like him, shared similar experiences, and was someone he looked up to. Sharpe cited examples that illustrated how some faculty and staff impacted his confidence in his classes and his sense of belonging on the campus. He explained

Yeah, so the before that was my professor in economics. And I would say the reason I was able to connect with him more, was number one, he was a person of color. He was an immigrant as well. And he was very, very wealthy person. He was very open about his finances. I mean, when you're studying finance, you would want someone who would be open about their finances, because then it's easy to learn. But he just broke things again. And one thing I liked about him and I think it's a pattern that you'll see, amongst all the people that I'm talking about, he broke the fourth wall.

During his story, Sharpe often referenced this idea of "breaking the fourth wall," which is a phrase from theatre due to his acting background. He explained that breaking the fourth wall meant getting to the audience's level and acknowledging and connecting with the

audience. Therefore, he appreciated that a professor could connect with him beyond just being a student. He shared

And it really shocked me. I always say like, if I ever needed anything in terms of my finances, I would definitely email him and he would always be available.

Always. If you guys ever need anything, call me, email me. And that's, even though I haven't spoken to him since I've taken his class, I know down the line, I will be emailing that man, because he knows he knows his stuff. So I would say breaking the fourth wall, that is what makes a professor more relatable.

Sharpe also shared that his community director and other assistant directors in Residence Life helped mentor him. He also felt that the academic advising he received from the general advisors at the advisement center had a greater impact than what he experienced with the business school advisors. He explained

But yeah, at the academic advisement center, for sure. I think that's only because they work with undeclared students. So they just see so many different types of people come in. I mean, they're, I think it is the only advising community that I can really think of that really has that diverse mentoring system in a way. When you go to the school of Business, it's just very baseline, you know, they're there to do what they have to do, find classes, cool. Let's go keep it moving. They don't connect with you the same way that they do at the advising center; they have the job of really helping new students who don't know what they want to do. And that comes with a lot of building rapport.

However, he did cite two positive experiences he had with a school of Business and with his general advisor as follows

Yeah, so it's crazy. I just talked bad about the school of Business. There was one advisor. And she definitely helped me a lot in just picking, picking a major and kind of going through what it was going to take for me to graduate on time, and because at first I was struggling with I told you before I was struggling with it, maybe Finance or management or one of the other ones, or accounting maybe and she was kind of just like, what do you want to do? And then she was asking me a lot of questions. And she helped me a lot in terms of getting some summer courses, getting me into classes that were booked. She doesn't work there anymore. But she was definitely one. My other general advisor as well. I was a university fellow, like I said, in fall of 2019. Yet, to this day, me and her are very, very close. Only because she helped me my freshman year all the way up. So she's kind of built my character a lot. So I would say, her, for sure, like, whenever there's a new student that comes to me like, Yo, I don't know who to talk to . I send them to her, she's this person, she's really, really good.

Overall, Sharpe's story highlighted the importance of family support, resilience, and the desire to excel and do well in school. Sharpe had faced many challenges, yet he persevered through it all and has come out even stronger. His past experiences have shaped his present and catalyzed all he has been able to accomplish. Sharpe was intentional about the choices he makes, making sure to craft strategic experiences that will enhance his resume and put him in a better position to do well not only academically but financially. His sense of belonging and self-efficacy are salient throughout his story and are clear connections to his major choice and why he has persisted in school.

Additionally, the connections and relationships with faculty, staff, and peers that he has cultivated over the years have also helped him make the most of his time at SSU.

### **Chapter Summary**

The narratives of the six participants shared in the previous section are all focused on their journey with selecting a college major and directly connected to their sense of belonging and self-efficacy. All participants intentionally decided to choose a college major that they felt most passionate about and confident in their ability to succeed in. For example, although Jones's true passion may have been in the Arts, he knew that declaring a major in the humanities was his best option. This was because he had already completed several courses that counted towards that major and felt confident in his ability to do well and graduate; therefore, he had increased levels of self-efficacy. Additionally, he also knew there were a lot of transferable skills within that major he could use on a resume to help him find a job in the future. Once he could connect with faculty in the humanities, he finally began to achieve a greater sense of belonging. Similarly, the other participants shared that every decision and interaction they made in their journey to choosing a major affected their sense of belonging and self-efficacy.

Regarding the annal and chronicle, most of the participants who completed this task created a variation of a timeline. Each participant discussed how their past, present, and future impacted their choices in major. Likewise, the time in which decisions were made was also evident, and locations served as important physical places of transformation and importance in their major selection process. In chapter five, I discussed my findings, including an analysis of each participant's narratives, as well as the themes that emerged from my data collection.

## Chapter 5

### Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore what it was like for African American and Latino male students to select a college major and whether these decisions had an influence on their sense of belonging and development of self-efficacy, as it relates to persistence and retention. To help answer my research questions, I used a narrative inquiry design to learn about the participants' experiences and life through their personal stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lewis, 2014).

Six African American and Latino males participated in my research study. Each student participated in two interviews conducted via zoom. The second interview ended with a review of their annal and chronicle (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), a graphic and visual representation of their journey with selecting their majors. The criteria for selecting these students was that they identify as male, were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, were under-graduates (sophomore, juniors, or seniors), and identified as Black and or African American, and Latino and or Hispanic, or a mix of both of these backgrounds. Additionally, my goal was only to recruit successful students with at least a 2.75 overall cumulative GPA and having earned at least thirty college credits. I did this because, in keeping with the anti-deficit framework (Harper, 2012) to examine this population, I wanted only to consider African American and Latino college men who were thriving in their academic majors. Five out of the six participants had at least a 2.75 GPA or above. Table 1 represents each participant's background information.

**Table 1***Participants*

Name	Background	Age	Class Status	Major	GPA
Pedro	Colombian	21	Sophomore	Family Science	3.0
Jones	African American	21	Junior	Humanities	2.7
Sharpe	Ghanaian	20	Junior	Business Finance	3.0
Wade	African/Colombian	20	Junior	Business Management	3.6
Eddie	Nigerian	21	Senior	Business Marketing	3.2
Tony	Cuban	21	Senior	Business, Language & Culture	3.5

In chapter four, I highlighted each participant's narratives to provide an in depth view of their journey and story. In this chapter, I present my findings by first providing an analysis of each participant's narrative using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space. I then highlight and explain the six themes that emerged from my data collection. Lastly, I summarize my findings.

### **Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Space**

Because I analyzed each story using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space, a description of this framework is justified. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry approach looks at personal and social (interaction), past, present, and future (continuity), and the notion of place (situation) to form the metaphorical three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (p. 50). The three-dimensional narrative inquiry space has "temporality along one dimension, the personal and the social along the second dimension, and place along the third " (p. 50). I created a chart adapted from Wang and

Geale (2015) that highlighted Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space to analyze each participant's story. This process helped me write each participant's story in chapter four, in a way that captured their voice and also featured aspects of their journey through the three-dimensional Space. I then went back to each participant's coded transcript and began to examine each aspect of their story, situating relevant pieces in Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space. Figures 9-14 highlight this process for each participant.

### *Eddie*

Eddie moved through the three-dimensional space when he described his personal feelings and experiences in the past, present, and future. There were many references to his family, which was salient in this journey through the three-dimensional space. He was very happy to share his background, primarily when he discussed his sibling's influence on some of his decisions. Eddie entered the three-dimensional space by first introducing his family background and shared a story of when he first arrived in the US from Nigeria. He continued to speak very fondly of his siblings and shared positive experiences about them. These memories are also detailed in chapter four in his narrative. These examples are also depicted in figure 9 in the first column of the graph, which means "interaction/personal" and when participants are looking inward towards feelings and internal conditions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Eddie then continued to the social aspect of the three-dimensional space, which described the existential conditions and the environment; here, he talked about his experience moving into his dorm room and the impact on him. He described feeling lonely and missing his siblings. Eddie then proceeds through the three-dimensional space

as he recalled past and present memories of his life before college and his experiences living on campus. Eddie then shifts to his future goals when he looked inward towards these possibilities. The situation/place column in figure 9 included all the relevant physical settings that played a role in his journey before and during this time at SSU. See figure 9 for Eddie’s story within the three-dimensional space structure.

**Figure 9**

*Eddie’s Story Within the Three-Dimensional Space Structure*

INTERACTION		CONTINUITY			Situation/Place
Personal	Social	Past	Present	Future	
Look inward towards internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions	Look outward toward existential conditions, that is, the environment	Look backward to remember experiences and stories from earlier times	Look at current experience, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event.	Look inward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines.	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters’ intentions, purposes, and different points of view.
Moving from Nigeria to US Happy about experiences, positive interactions with siblings	Dorming freshman year; feeling lonely and sad (missed siblings; used to living with all of them) Isolation during covid, finding space to enjoy on campus	Fun experiences with siblings Experience with making money and selling candy Sadness living on campus freshman year	Internship experiences, major experiences, living on campus, finding things to do during covid, chats with faculty about life at the rec center	Moving out of NJ Securing job in social media marketing	Relative’s home (past) Middle school (past) High School (past) New home (past) Dorm room (freshmen year) Switched major end of freshmen year Classroom (accounting when he failed test) School of business Rec Center University College Residence Life -Res Hall Field (playing football) Social media marketing internship (remote)

*Note.* Adapted from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Wang and Geale (2015)

**Pedro**

Pedro’s journey in the three-dimensional space highlighted his experience with transferring to SSU, which was very positive. This is indicated in figure 10 under the interaction section as he looked inward towards his feelings. He also described becoming

involved in UC fellows, and his moral disposition was that of happiness. Additionally, he looked outwards toward environmental conditions and referenced the impact COVID-19 had on his experience, pivoting to remote instruction. As Pedro told his story, he was in and out of the three-dimensional space. In terms of temporality, he referenced past and present experiences within the context of the transfer process at SSU.

Pedro also remembered transformative experiences from his past, which remained with him as he moved through the three-dimensional space. Pedro described the physical landscape of his middle school experiences, which is seen in the continuity aspect of the three-dimensional space structure. His middle school as a place is noted in the situation/place column in figure 10. Later, as he went backward again, he discussed his negative experience when he began SSU as a commuter and some of the adjustment issues he faced with this transition. See figure 10 for Pedro's story within the three-dimensional space structure.

**Figure 10**

*Pedro’s Story Within the Three-Dimensional Space Structure*

INTERACTION		CONTINUITY			Situation/Place
Personal	Social	Past	Present	Future	
Look inward towards internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions	Look outward toward existential conditions, that is, the environment	Look backward to remember experiences and stories from earlier times	Look at current experience, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event.	Look inward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines.	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters’ intentions, purposes, and different points of view.
Happy about transferring to SSU Great experience being a part of the UC fellows Likes living on campus- pre pandemic he loved being in his dorm room	Unpleasant experience commuter first semester; misses dorming on campus; very affected by COVID-19; wishes he was back on campus for classes	Remembers experience in middle school as being transformative; recalled struggling academically but pulling through; enjoys his classes and FSHD major; enjoyed teaching an in-person class for seminar	Internship experiences- Disney College program, missed being on campus	Wants to go into higher education administration; graduate school in the future; goal is to influence policy change related to degree attainment	Experience in parsippany Living in Dover (past) Middle school (past) High School (past) Decided on Major sophomore year UC Fellows experience - interest in Higher Ed. University College Disney College Program (Florida)

*Note.* Adapted from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Wang and Geale (2015)

**Jones**

Jones’s story within the three-dimensional space highlighted some of his most difficult moments, especially when he described some of the traumatic events that occurred early in his life. We can see this within the interaction and personal/social column of the three-dimensional space structure. He described having a negative experience his first semester at SSU and how he experienced feelings of isolation during this time. Jones later reverts to his past as he moved into the social aspect of the three-dimensional space to describe existential conditions he experienced and shared an example of the verbal abuse he endured and his time in a homeless shelter. However, as

he moved from the past to the present and described his future plans, there was a bit of a shift to a more hopeful Jones.

Although he did share that he experienced rejection from the acting major, he still had a contingency plan. He began the process of researching an alternative major in the humanities. Jones’s resilience was seen throughout his story as he moved through the three-dimensional space, as illustrated by his desire to seek support from faculty and staff such as his academic advisor. See figure 11 for Jones’s story within the three-dimensional space structure.

**Figure 11**

*Jones’s Story Within the Three-Dimensional Space*

INTERACTION		CONTINUITY			Situation/Place
Personal	Social	Past	Present	Future	
Look inward towards internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions	Look outward toward existential conditions, that is, the environment	Look backward to remember experiences and stories from earlier times	Look at current experience, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event.	Look inward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines.	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters’ intentions, purposes, and different points of view.
Feelings of hope; transferring to SSU from county college; Feelings of anger, rejection and isolation; remembers traumatic childhood	Unpleasant experience at SSU after first semester; difficulty making friends; mostly isolated from others; does not connect with track teammates	Remembers experience at home and verbal abuse from family; recalls negative experience living in homeless shelter and working multiple jobs Hopes to make enough money and attend a 4 year school.	Experience with researching humanities major as an alternative; has met with director of the program to gain insight; seeks out help to understand humanities curriculum/academic advising support	Has a passion for the arts; auditioned several times but has been rejected; has not given up hope to pursue acting. Also has interest in television and digital media; communication studies. Plans to re-audition if he is allowed. Will continue to seek out opportunities for humanities major	Experience living and growing up at home with family (Neptune, NJ) Lots of trauma and verbal abuse in his home Physically assaulted and bullied Health problems and developmental disability Attending Ocean County College Attending Brookdale Community college Experience living in homeless shelter Working at supermarket Being part of track team Living on campus; roommate issues Being part of Red Hawk Fellows Being part of EOF program

*Note.* Adapted from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Wang and Geale (2015)

## *Wade*

Wade's journey through the three-dimensional space was an enjoyable one that began with his excitement about being a student leader. You can see this in the interaction aspect of the structure as he looked inward towards his feelings of hope and his moral composition. At the beginning of the interview, he asked me to pause the recording so he could put on his university fellow's staff shirt. He felt so much pride in being a campus leader, which set the tone for the rest of the interview. As he described environmental conditions, he discussed his desire to leave his small town and shared this as he described his experience with the college selection process.

Wade moved through the three-dimensional space by consistently moving in and out of past and present experiences and this can be seen in the continuity part of figure 12. He continued to describe key moments in his past, present, and future that illustrated how he chose his major and highlighted his desire to be a campus leader. Later you see these moments reflected in the last part of the figure, which is the situation/place where I highlighted some physical spaces and situations he experienced as he moved through the space. See figure 12 for Wade's story within the three-dimensional space structure.

**Figure 12**

*Wade’s Story Within the Three-Dimensional Space Structure*

INTERACTION		CONTINUITY			Situation/Place
Personal	Social	Past	Present	Future	
Look inward towards internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions	Look outward toward existential conditions, that is, the environment	Look backward to remember experiences and stories from earlier times	Look at current experience, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event.	Look inward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines.	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters’ intentions, purposes, and different points of view.
Very excited to describe experience at SSU Experience has been positive and is happy with his choice Described extensive search process for colleges (applied to 5 schools).	Felt that attending SSU was what “he needed” Desire to leave small town and explore horizons Bit of culture shock from first impression of SSU Campus aesthetic reaffirmed his decision to choose SSU Credits his mother for her hard work	Remembers experience of the college search process; experience was also related to choosing majors Remembers time at home and strict upbringing; in retrospect feels that it was necessary Has fond memories of growing up	Experience with various leadership activities on campus; RA, UC fellow, member of SGA; president of La Hermandad. Feels these experiences help him develop skills and enhance understanding of major	Has passion for learning and mentoring others. Excited at the prospect of attaining master’s degree and doctorate. Has a plan to pursue management positions and career opportunities for major. Really enjoys networking and fostering relationships with peers.	Experience living and growing up at home with family in Hillside, NJ Grandparents (maternal) were influential to his upbringing Remembers being a scholar all his life Was a leader throughout his middle school and high school days Relationship with UC advisor and working for UC college was salient Relationship with staff in library Residence Life - moments as an RA Described classroom experiences via Zoom to be engaging

*Note.* Adapted from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Wang and Geale (2015)

**Tony**

Tony moved through the three-dimensional space, beginning with his process for selecting colleges to apply to, all driven by his desire to be on the swim team. Tony was very excited to describe his experience with selecting SSU. We see this in figure 13 in the interaction aspect of the three-dimensional space, and because he was recruited as a student athlete, this is referenced throughout the personal and social parts of the structure. As Tony moved to the continuity aspect of the three-dimensional space, he began to reflect on his past and his experience moving from Cuba to Spain and then Miami before

ultimately settling in New Jersey. He later described his present experiences at SSU with choosing his major and becoming more involved on campus and looked inward to discuss his future plans. In the last part of the three-dimensional space, I detailed the situation and places that were crucial moments and physical landscapes in his journey and within the space. See figure 13 for Tony’s story within the three-dimensional space structure.

**Figure 13**

*Tony’s Story Within the Three-Dimensional Space*

INTERACTION		CONTINUITY			Situation/Place
Personal	Social	Past	Present	Future	
Look inward towards internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions	Look outward toward existential conditions, that is, the environment	Look backward to remember experiences and stories from earlier times	Look at current experience, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event.	Look inward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines.	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters’ intentions, purposes, and different points of view.
Good experience at SSU; was recruited for swimming; liked campus and knew friends that attended. Was very enthusiastic in explaining his process for selecting colleges; all based on swimming.	Felt he wanted more out of college than just swimming; sophomore year was beginning of transformation; quit swim team and began getting involved on campus	Remembers experiences with moving from Cuba to Spain; the impact his mother’s medical career had on his relationship with grandparents and the importance of obtaining a college degree. Remembers struggle with language; adapting to the Spanish language in Spain and Miami and then learning English in New Jersey. Recalls feeling isolated as the only Latino on	Experience with UC fellows and RA job. Also really likes his role in SGA. Expressed really liking his internship and despite it not being the full experience due to covid, he was happy he got to participate in a marketing project which further solidified his interest in business. Liked volunteering for EMS and also being part of Voice Leaders.	Has passion for language business and culture; feels major is the right fit. Can see it translating well into finance and also appreciates having a concentration in Spanish. Wants to work in a Spanish Bank.	Experience moving from Cuba to Spain at 11 years old Moved from Spain to Miami (US) at 12 years old Moved from Miami to NJ at 15 years old Swam for Union City High School all four years Recruited to attend SSU as an undeclared student Quit SSU swim team to get more involved Joined UC fellows, became RA and SGA senator Cultivated relationships with professors Declared Language, Business and Culture Major.

*Note.* Adapted from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Wang and Geale (2015)

### *Sharpe*

Sharpe moved through the three-dimensional space by first recalling a negative experience in his past that served as the catalyst for choosing a finance major. This is seen in the interaction aspect of the structure, where he looked inward and described his feelings as he experienced challenges before SSU and during his time. He also detailed the difficulty he faced related to finances and how his family struggled financially when he began his college search process. You can see him then look back towards his past experience before SSU, and we see his affinity for the arts as he shared his background with acting and participating in plays during high school. Sharpe had a few highs and lows at SSU, experiences that have ultimately shaped his character and motivated him to continue to excel in his academics and make meaningful connections with faculty and staff. These highs and lows are depicted in the continuity of the three-dimensional space he moved through the space by referencing his past experiences. See figure 14 for Sharpe's story within the three-dimensional space structure.

**Figure 14**

*Sharpe's Story Within the Three-Dimensional Space*

INTERACTION		CONTINUITY			Situation/Place
Personal	Social	Past	Present	Future	
Look inward towards internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions	Look outward toward existential conditions, that is, the environment	Look backward to remember experiences and stories from earlier times	Look at current experience, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event.	Look inward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines.	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters' intentions, purposes, and different points of view.
Described impact that older sister's college experience had on him. Lots of experiences related to finances have impacted his life. Hoped to have been able to help family out; worked a lot to help support himself and not place a burden on parents.	Process for selecting colleges was limited due to lack of finances; family experienced a lot of debt his older sister's expensive college; had hope to be an actor and study at Juliard. COVID impacted him tremendously; felt let down; experienced financial hardships;	Remembers experiences in high school related to the arts. Was always very creative; had a YouTube Channel and loved theater; wanted to become an actor. Did not have a desire to attend college; wanted to pursue his youtube channel full-time after high school. Also wanted to pursue acting. Remembers the first play (Tarzan) his parents attended	Pandemic caused him to shift focus to learning more about stocks and finances; relates it back summer job at a party planning company. His cousin's experience with Wall Street has given him momentum and desire to pursue a similar path.	Interested in a career in finance-investment banking. Plans to apply for internships at different firms. Interested in real estate as well. More connected to major post pandemic; pandemic caused him to look at finances and learn to budget. Learned about the stock market; reads more about sectors and investments.	Experience growing up in Ghanaian home 2014; year his sister went to college; played huge role in debt Impact of financial debt and hardships his family experienced after his father lost his job Experience with youtube led to grades declining Enjoyed doing plays; wanted to pursue acting Impact of Residence Life journey- became an RA to get free housing and help eliminate stress based on finances in college; grades fell; was put on academic probation; needed to retake a class in the summer; had to get a job; loved job at party planning company

*Note.* Adapted from Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and Wang and Geale (2015)

**Themes**

The data from the interviews, annals and chronicles, and the researcher's memos helped me identify the following themes, which helped answer my research questions:

1. Family Involvement and Expectations
2. The Importance of Campus Involvement on Sense of Belonging
3. The Influence of Faculty and Staff Relationships on Sense of Belonging and Self-Efficacy
4. The Role of Academic Advising in the Major Selection Process

5. Stability and Practicality in Major Choice
6. The Impact of COVID-19 on Sense of Belonging

***Theme 1: Family Involvement and Expectations***

The majority of the participants shared examples of their family's involvement in their educational journey at SSU. Additionally, beyond parental involvement, participants described family members such as siblings, aunts, and uncles, and noted that these individuals were instrumental in supporting them in their educational journey. Family involvement and expectations were described in the following ways: support for attending school, the expectation to get a college education, participation in the college selection process and adjustment, and influence on the major selection process. Although five of my participants described substantial family support, one participant, Jones, described a lack of family support and involvement in his educational endeavors.

The participant who shared that he did not have any family involvement or support in his college journey used this absence to fuel his motivation and drive to succeed. When describing family expectations for attending college, many participants agreed that they were expected to attend college. The expectation to attend college was common amongst participants whose families immigrated to the United States (Tony, Sharpe, Eddie and Pedro). For example, Tony explained how his mother always expected that he would attend college. He shared

I just kind of grew up always with an expectation for me, I guess from her to like, go to college and get a degree. Yeah. That's like the American dream. Like I guess for her that's like, the way to go. And I kind of believe it. I know it's not for everyone, but I kind of buy into the idea. You go to college and you get a degree.

Tony's narrative speaks to the immigrant experience related to a parent's wish for their child to do well and take advantage of the opportunities in America, one of those opportunities being access to higher education.

Likewise, although Sharpe didn't want to attend college and preferred to work on his YouTube channel after high school, he explained that his parents instilled a strong foundation for the importance of getting a college education. He shared

And my parents really ingrained in me just how important the foundation of just having a degree was saying that, you know, it's always great to have a backup plan.

Sharpe's narrative describes what many students experience when deciding to attend college, and that is, picking between their passion and what may be practical based on their family's expectations. It was evident that Sharpe wanted to pursue his passion for YouTube, but attending college was his backup plan and something that was important to his parents. When it came to declaring or choosing majors, most participants stated that their family or some family members directly influenced their decision to pursue specific majors. For example, Tony shared how his mother helped him feel comfortable with his major selection process. He explained

Um, it was when I was trying to decide if I wanted to do something like a bio or chemistry major, like do pre med or like if I didn't actually really, really like that. And I remember sitting down with her outside on a little swing that we had in the backyard and like I was really scared to talk to her about it because I didn't want to let her know that I was confused and like I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. But I talked to her and she actually made me feel really well. She

was like, Oh no, like you know, it should be always what you like. You shouldn't pursue things like what I did, or like for money or for fame or anything like that. You should always do what you're passionate about and pick what you think you're gonna like. You know it's okay to take some classes to figure it out. But she pretty much made me feel really calm about it, like at peace about it like it's okay if I don't have it figured out.

Tony's narrative highlights a positive experience of choosing majors, which may not always be the case for some students. In his narrative, he explained that while his mother was a doctor, she did not project this career choice on him but instead allowed him to explore and choose something he liked and was passionate about. This was a bit of a contrast to Pedro's experience in which he shared that his parents were adamant that he should not pursue the arts, but instead, they wanted to ensure that he was successful. He shared

They didn't feel too excited about it because they already knew people that have majored in musical theater but were not successful. They have actual friends who have been in the music industry that don't really do much with their degree. So my parents just felt that it was a big no for them...So I feel like from my parents standpoint they are more of like, oh, like you need to be someone in life.

Pedro's family placed a lot of emphasis on success and being financially stable, which meant choosing a major that would yield better career choices, and they believed this would not be the case with a major in the arts. Additionally, family culture, background, and educational experiences played a significant role in how participants described their decision-making process for selecting a major. Most participants' families immigrated to

the US from another country (Nigeria, Ghana, Cuba, Colombia, and Angola), but they identified as African American or Latino. The cultural upbringing of their family had a strong impact on how their families viewed education and careers, as well as the career trajectory of many of their family members. For example, participants of African descent noted that several family members regarded majors that had status such as medicine and or Business as very important.

Eddie shared

I feel like it was my parents, and probably family, friends, and like my siblings, because accounting is like a fancy. It's like a fancy major within business, like one like the smarter ones or whatever. Like, medical field occupations are pretty big. Doctor or a dentist, whatever. So I think that probably influenced me to look at one of those or something similar. But I know her sons (his aunt) are both in the medical field. I think it probably influenced me to like, probably to work for higher- like higher jobs cause like in our family and culture.

Eddie's narrative described his experience living with family when they immigrated to the US and how this influenced him to consider majors in science and medicine. Like Eddie, Sharpe, of Ghanaian descent, shared a similar experience where his family supported his love of theatre and arts in high school. Still, once it came to choosing a major in college, his family urged him to have a backup plan and specifically suggested he think about careers outside of the arts. Additionally, Sharpe felt pressure to do well academically because many of his family members had attended prestigious schools and excelled despite being from a different country. He described this experience as

I mean, in my entire family, the academic performance is crazy. Like I have an aunt that went to Yale and Harvard. My uncle went to UPENN and another one went to Cornell. So like I said, again, more pressure on us, it's like, ridiculous pressure, for no reason. Like, mind you these are people that came from a completely different country. And were able to excel here. Sometimes it's unheard of, maybe we might get one person, but every single person is... So all the time at Thanksgiving, when in those conversations where they're asking, what are you going to do? It's weird to be like, I want to be an actor or because they wanted me to be one of those top things.

Receiving the approval or support of their family was also a factor that manifested itself in how participants experienced selecting their major. It is not uncommon for students to feel pressure to do well because of their family upbringing and past experiences.

However, for these participants, it was a mix of wanting to do well because of their family, including parents and grandparents, who sacrificed a lot for them, as well as also wanting to prove that they could be equally successful as those before them. Participants felt a sense of responsibility in choosing a major that their families would accept.

### ***Theme 2: The Importance of Campus Involvement on Sense of Belonging***

Campus involvement and engagement has been noted as an important function of student success and retention. This was fairly evident in the findings as most participants were involved in several campus organizations and were considered student leaders.

Being involved in campus activities through work or volunteer experiences helped the participants establish a sense of belonging and motivated them to do well, impacting their self-efficacy beliefs. Moreover, because the participant's involvement in campus

activities helped them develop a sense of belonging, they were more likely to remain at the institution, which meant they were more motivated to choose a major. The major selection process was unequivocally related to sense of belonging and self-efficacy, which directly resulted from campus involvement and engagement.

Five out of the six participants were resident assistants (RA) and university fellows (mentors for first-year students). Becoming an RA was a pivotal role for many participants. It helped them financially and provided them with leadership experience that influenced the participants to develop a stronger sense of belonging. Being involved on campus resulted in participants developing leadership skills and establishing a strong sense of belonging. Sharpe shared, “and that also played a role in why I ended up becoming an RA as well. Just trying to take off the debt.”

Wade also explained how much he has evolved because of his RA position and shared

And the experience as an RA not only has helped elevate my leadership, but the experience working in a team, working with various staff, diverse staff, working with these different personalities, working under a community director, that you got to understand their leadership style, and their management style, in order to see how you can acclimate yourself with that style.

Wade’s experience as an RA taught him a lot of leadership skills and made him very well- rounded. It also exposed him to working with diverse personalities and people, which may have helped him develop a strong sense of belonging at SSU.

Tony shared how his desire to get more involved on campus prompted him to quit the swim team. This was interesting because Tony was recruited to SSU through the

swim team, and the decision to leave the team highlights his desire to step outside of his comfort zone. He explained

I felt like I had already covered that part of like, being an athlete and like, grinding and like, going to practices in the morning, like going to the gym. I felt like I had already done that. And I felt like I wanted to do something more school related, I wanted to become like, good at school. I just want to challenge myself. So I decided to quit the swim team and tried to get more involved in school. And that's when I joined that student government association. I started working as a University fellow, which is a peer mentor advisor position, recently became an RA too. So I've been trying to get really involved in school and trying to get involved with the community and trying to become like a student leader. I think that made my experience better at SSU.

Tony's narrative explains how getting involved on campus allowed him to become more invested in school in a different way than just athletics. He was able to see notable differences between his experience at SSU and his peers who were not involved in campus activities outside of swimming. Campus involvement was highly beneficial for Tony's leadership development and his sense of belonging. Additionally, focusing more on school-related activities also made Tony invest more time in his major selection process, especially once he had more access to the advisors at University College due to his role as a peer mentor.

Participants also described their involvement in several other campus organizations and the impact that participating in these activities had on them. For example, one participant was a member of a Greek-Lettered organization, one was a

former student-athlete, one was a student club president, and two were members of the Student Government Association (SGA). These campus organizations provided another connection to SSU and undoubtedly impacted each participant's sense of belonging. Additionally, most participants cited campus involvement as a factor in their leadership development and why they could obtain internships and seek out more opportunities.

Tony shared

So I've been trying to get really involved in school and trying to get involved with the community and trying to become like a student leader. So that made me feel really well. After that, I joined the Student Association last year. And that was really like an amazing experience. So yeah, definitely Residence Life, definitely Student Government. Definitely, University College plays a great role.

The UC fellow's program, which was equivalent to a peer mentor program, was also cited as one of the most influential leadership roles on campus for all five participants who were part of the fellow's program. For example, Tony noted

And then my second semester when I decided dorm on campus, that's when I really did see all of, like, build a group of friends because I got to meet new people in my classes, and we started to connect with each other, and also with the help of the fellows program, I got to network with other people, other students. And then we exchanged some information and then we started to work together and become friends as well.

Participants described working as a UC fellow as an opportunity to provide support to students experiencing some of the same things they went through when they first arrived

at SSU. It also served as another space to meet other students, provide mentorship, and build closer relationships. For example, Tony shared

And the other one is definitely working as a fellow because I've really gotten into being like that resource for someone especially new students because it is for freshmen students. It makes me feel really good when you can help a student who was in the same position as you, like having some struggles and you kind of have been through it already. And you're like, hey, I've been there already. You're like, I know how you feel like don't worry like I can help you out.

Moreover, many participants expressed a desire to advocate and mentor others and working as UC fellows allowed them to guide first-year students in getting acclimated to SSU. Pedro also shared how much of an impact being a fellow had on his development and future as a higher education professional, which connected to his major choice. He explained

I feel that being a fellow has really defined who I am. And it's really helped me realize that sometimes even when people don't advocate for themselves like you need to give them that hand and be like hey if you do want to advocate I'm going to be here for you. I want to help you, no matter what. And that's something that I'm really fond about being a part of the fellows program that's given me like a little bit of experience with doing what I'm going to be doing in higher ed. And that's something that I'm really fond about being a fellow, because I'm not just improving my leadership skills but I'm also making an impact on someone.

Additionally, participants who were in the UC Fellows program had access to more academic advisement because they were able to establish closer relationships with

the advisors, and provide low-level support and advisement to first year students. Through this process of being a UC fellow, they were able to participate in major exploration activities not necessarily realizing it was also helping them in their own major selection journeys. For example, Tony explained how his sophomore year was a transitional year for him when he became involved on campus. He shared

Then I got hired as a University success fellow my sophomore year. Um, this is like the beginning of me trying to figure it out like okay I want to be a student leader more like I wanted to find the path that I want to go to. I'm trying to find myself. I joined the Student Government Association sophomore year too. I remember taking the focus 2 self-assessment sophomore year and that was kind of like my major, it was on the list. Yeah. So that was also like a big part of exactly like figuring out what I wanted to do. And then I declared language, business and culture with a minor in psychology.

It was evident that campus involvement and developing leadership experience directly influenced each participant's sense of belonging. The narratives revealed that participants felt happy, and most connected to SSU when participating in various clubs and organizations. Participants saw themselves as having a role in SSU as campus leaders, thus contributing to the institution's mission. Moreover, participants felt motivated and excited to help other students at SSU, especially first-year students. These experiences contributed to the participant's major selection process. Once participants felt invested in their leadership experience by participating in campus organizations, this increased their sense of belonging and self-efficacy, prompting them to make informed decisions in their own development, including selecting a major.

### *Theme 3: The Impact of Faculty and Staff Relationships on Sense of Belonging and Self-Efficacy*

My data suggests that developing a solid sense of belonging in college is very important to the persistence and retention of students of color. Additionally, establishing meaningful relationships with faculty and staff helped the participants in this study feel confident, engaged, and more immersed in their college environment. The findings of this study revealed this to be true for those participants who established a connection with a faculty member in their intended major and when they established a meaningful relationship with a staff member on campus. Participants who were still on the fence about making a decision ended up declaring their majors based on how well they connected with a faculty member in that department. Many participants (Eddie, Sharpe, Pedro, and Jones) cited positive experiences and relationships with professors, and some chose majors based on good experiences in courses.

The impact on a sense of belonging and building self-efficacy was salient due to confidence and belief in their ability to do well in courses based on relationships and faculty support. This relationship was also directly connected to the major selection process. For some participants, an experience with a staff member and or faculty member in the academic program prompted them to choose their majors. Pedro shared that he selected his major because he appreciated the empathy one of his professors showed him during the pandemic. He was not yet in the major, but decided to choose it because he was more motivated and felt like he would feel at a home in the major. He shared

I do have a professor right now who's a part of that department, where every week he sends out a letter to us. And he sends out like a long letter, just like motivating

us, and telling us that everything's always going to be okay. And he just talks to us about things. So I feel like everyone in that department is already like a family, and they all like to connect with each other. So I feel like it is going to feel like home, once I declare my major. So that's what I was seeing all around with that is FSHD major. That I was really interested in it and I was showing motivation. And I was giving myself more motivation to be successful in it because I wanted to apply for the program. So, I was showing like higher grades and stuff for picking that major.

Pedro's narrative reveals that a caring and supportive academic environment were important to him when choosing a major. For Sharpe, an experience with a specific professor ignited a passion for business and helped him select his major. He shared

It wasn't until I took micro economics. And I had this amazing professor. I always recommend him. And just the way that he broke down business, I was like wow I love this. Like I really, really loved it. I felt like I was on Shark Tank. And it was amazing. And I think that was when I finally came to the decision, I could do business for sure.

Moreover, participants reported feeling confident in their academics, which again was based on direct feedback and mentorship from professors, which gave them higher levels of self-efficacy and helped them select their majors. Jones, who wanted to choose a major in the arts, explained how connecting with a faculty member in the Humanities, who also had a background in music, helped him become more interested in the major. He shared

But he was cool and very nice, um, he is a musician himself so it's kind of cool to like. Not like my level, he just plays like instrumentals for local locals and stuff like that so at least is cool to have someone who that, you know, who's have a similar path as you like. He's humanities and stuff like that. But he doesn't use it on the side as well and he has a course he's a graduate student so he has a Bachelor's already in and now he's. I think he's getting his master's.

For Jones, it was essential to find a commonality with a faculty member in the humanities major since that was not his first choice major; being able to relate to someone in the field made a big difference to his acceptance of the major. Wade shared that his professors connected him to his major and impacted his sense of belonging. He explained

What keeps me closer to the school business is the classroom, the classes, the courses that I'm given, as well as some of the professors. I'm not going to say all. I'm going to say some, because there are professors that are really, with great experience, great background, and their background, sharing that with us, sharing that information, sharing that knowledge that they may have learned from those real life experiences, literally gives you that confidence that okay, now they're educating us, they did all this, but now they're actually taking time off to teach us what it takes to do all that. And it's really motivating.

Wade's narrative revealed that his experience with specific professors in the school of Business gave him the confidence to do well and kept him more connected to his major.

In addition to having positive experiences with faculty, participants also described other meaningful relationships with staff and its impact on their sense of belonging. In particular, mentorship directly resulted from establishing relationships with staff who

served in different roles like club advisors, former and current supervisors, academic advisors, Deans, and even a campus security officer. Wade shared his experience with campus leaders such as a college Dean as having a significant impact on his development and commitment to SSU. Likewise, Tony explained that while he had great relationships with faculty, he felt that his academic advisor and supervisor from the university fellows program served more as a mentor than other faculty and staff. He shared

Yeah, I've always had with my professors, we've always been on really good terms and like they have got to know my name pretty well, gotten to know me. We have good conversations after class, but I think that the people who are really like mentors to me, have been like my advisors. They've been from University College, but not from the language, business, and culture major, like I do have contact with my advisor, but not as much as I do my advisor in University College that have helped me a lot. But yeah, I think those are the ones that I've really had as mentors and helped me.

Tony explained that the advisor in University College helped him with his application process to become an RA and helped him with his resume when it came time to apply for internships. The relationship that Tony was able to cultivate with this advisor greatly impacted his sense of belonging and connection to SSU. Wade shared a similar experience about gaining a mentor in a top leadership position and expressed how surprised he was that he made time for him, given his various responsibilities on SSU. He shared

He became my mentor and we spoke about a few times at the end of my freshman year, because that's when I joined the program. He had a lot going on, you know,

he's a whole Dean, so I'm just like, No, you got a lot going on. I don't want to take away your time. He'll always be like, no no, you are not taking my time, I am here for you. And I was just like wow. I was just astounded by the fact that he's the whole Dean. I had the impression that, oh, the higher the position, the less time you have. But he was very genuine, he was very true to his word. And that was another person who I had a great takeaway from.

It was also clear that developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with faculty and staff impacted participants' sense of belonging. It made them feel more connected to the campus and their respective academic programs and majors. These connections also helped most participants decide on their majors as referenced in the narratives previously shared. When participants expressed moments where they felt their professors were relatable and connected with them, their self-efficacy vastly increased because they felt more confident in their academic abilities. Additionally, because their sense of belonging was also strengthened they were more likely to make a meaningful choice in their majors, which influenced their retention.

#### ***Theme 4: The Role of Academic Advising in the Major Selection Process***

Participants described their experiences with academic advising at SSU. They noted differences between faculty advisors, those assigned once a student declares a major, and general advisors such as the ones in University College (UC) who work with undeclared students. In this study, UC advisors served as both academic advisors, and some also coordinated the UC fellows program and worked as supervisors for those participants in the fellows program. UC advisors had a strong influence and impact on participants' major selection process. Because most of the participants came in

undeclared, they experienced advising through the UC advisement center. Participants credited the UC advisors for assisting and supporting them in their decision-making process. All participants met with and or worked with their advisors to select their majors. After declaring their majors, some participants did not find their faculty advisors as helpful and preferred the assistance of UC advisors. However, these participants did appreciate making connections with some of the faculty/professors in the major areas. Eddie shared his experience with both an advisor in the School of Business and a general advisor in UC as positive ones. He explained

There was one advisor. And she definitely helped me a lot in just picking, picking a major and kind of going through what it was going to take for me to graduate on time, and because at first I was struggling with I told you before I was struggling with it, maybe finance or management or one of the other ones, or accounting maybe and she was kind of just like, what do you want to do? And then she was asking me a lot of questions. And she helped me a lot in terms of getting some summer courses, getting me into classes that were booked. Another one was in UC, and I was a university fellow, like I said, in fall of 2019. Yet, to this day, me and her are very, very close. Only because she helped me my freshman year all the way up. So she's kind of built my character a lot. So I would say, her, for sure, like, whenever there's a new student that comes to me like, Yo, I don't know who to talk to . I send them to her, she's this person, she's really, really good.

Eddie's narrative was unique because he was the only participant who came to SSU already being declared a business major and therefore was assigned a faculty advisor. However, as a UC fellow, he found value in connecting with UC advisors. Because he

had access to the support of UC advisors, he took advantage of seeking their advice and recommendations.

Pedro also commended his advisor for helping him choose his major and shared, "so, my academic advisor has been phenomenal with helping me pick a major." Wade also explained that he had a great experience working with his advisor in UC and shared his advisor's steps to explore his major.

Thankfully, I was blessed with my advisor. Not just to be my advisor, but to be my New Student seminar teacher. My main man, he held me down. He gave me a lot of information. So he recommended that I take two courses related to communications and two related to business. So I did that, um, they were both gen eds, and they both counted for gen eds, regardless if I chose one major or not. And I was just okay, so when I really got to think I gotta make a choice. And I remember, the last day before spring break, it was a Friday. I came to the University College office, spoke to him and I told him listen, I want to apply for the school of business.

Working with his academic advisor proved very beneficial in Wade's major selection process. His advisor was able to guide him on taking specific steps and supporting him by carefully reviewing his choices. Sharpe also explained how his experience in the school of business was very different from what he experienced in University College. He shared

Okay, so I would say, the advisors in University College for sure. So, yeah, but those in particular, I like that is a good thing, because I don't think the school of business advisors are the greatest. But yeah, at University College, for sure. I

think that's only because they work with undeclared students. So they just see so many different types of people come in. I mean, I think University College is the only advising community that I can really think of that really has that diverse mentoring system in a way. When you go to the school of business, it's just very baseline, you know, they're there to do what they have to do, find classes, cool. Let's go keep it moving. They don't connect with you the same way that University College does; they have the job of really finding new students who don't know what they want to do. And that comes with a lot of building rapport. So yes, probably University College.

Sharpe explained that when he needed to pick classes for the semester, he knew that he could go to the school of Business. Still, when it came to getting more advice and support, University College provided him more developmental advising than the prescriptive kind he received in the school of Business. Academic advising played a critical role in helping participants declare their majors and feel confident that they chose the right majors. Connecting with UC advisors helped the participants feel more connected to SSU and helped them develop a stronger sense of belonging, especially for those that also served as UC fellows. Moreover, UC academic advisors were more developmental in their approach to advisement, taking time to work with the participants on making informed decisions about choosing their majors.

#### ***Theme 5: Stability and Practicality in Major Choice***

There were several factors that the participants considered as important when it came to ultimately choosing their majors. This theme will focus on the most significant factor in how the participants chose their majors: finding stability and practicality within

the major. To begin, four out of the five participants declared Business majors. The other two participants chose majors in the humanities. There were notable examples regarding the financial implications of the major and the likelihood of finding financial stability. Pedro described his struggle to find the balance between choosing a major he would like but also one that would give him financial stability. He shared

And I just feel that I personally wouldn't want to pick a career where I'm going to be dreading it for the rest of my life. I want to pick something that I'm going to like, but then I'm also going to be able to afford bills and pay the rent.

Pedro grappled with passion and practicality, and his parent's opinion on the major he chose was also critical. While he enjoyed the arts, he knew it would not give him many viable career options. Sharpe shared how prior knowledge and research helped him narrow down choices before he matriculated. Sharpe explained that he went to his high school guidance counselor for advice on choosing a major and admitted he was focused on finding a major that "made the most money" because he wanted to help his family. He explained

I remember going to my guidance counselor. I said can I ask you something?" I was like, out of all these things, which one sounds like it would make the most money. Because at the time, I'm just thinking, I'm like, I need to help my mom, like at this point, whatever it is, it just has to be something that's going to provide the finances. At a certain point I was, I didn't have time for my dreams, I kind of just came to, I grew up within a matter of a couple months. And I was just like, Okay, I'm not a little boy anymore. With all these. Now it's real life. Like, my dad just went unemployed with all this debt, my mom's, she doesn't know how she's

gonna pay for school, I need something that's gonna bring us income. So I just asked my guidance counselor, like which one of these sounds like it's gonna bring the most money in? She was like finance or like Business would.

Although when students generally choose a major is a factor in the major selection process, most participants entered the university undeclared and declared their majors around their sophomore year. This factor was not as significant for the participants as they were all on track to graduate on time based on when they declared their major. However, one participant changed concentration after an experience scoring low on an exam. This decision could have had significant implications for timely graduation, but thankfully he made the decision pretty early on. Eddie shared

So yeah he told me I should not be taking accounting if you get that score. So the professor hands out the papers, and I look down at my paper, and my friend, he has a big smile on his face. I got mine and it was very low. I just stayed quiet when he asked. So like that same day, I call my siblings, like I don't want to be an Accounting Major anymore.

Eddie lost confidence in his ability to do well in Accounting based on a single test score. This situation alone was enough to make him switch his concentration that very same day. Ultimately, Eddie knew that his skills and passion were more aligned with Marketing based on his prior experiences. Additionally, Eddie changed concentrations because he knew that ultimately shifting to marketing was more practical for him as he already had transferable skills within this concentration. Three participants moved to different majors from what they initially intended to declare. Jones changed from Arts to Humanities based on competency and practicality. Jones had difficulty gaining access to

the College of the Arts and worked with his EOF advisor to identify a backup plan. It was much more accessible and convenient for Jones to choose the Humanities because he already had classes that counted towards that major. Sharpe wanted Arts but settled on business based on practicality and family influence. Pedro felt that the Arts would not provide him with job security, so he decided on a major in the humanities based on leadership experiences. He stated

Okay, so, like, just looking back, I like everything, like my experience with the FSHD major. I've already had some experience with it, being in my fellows program, and just the whole, like, mission of the department, I guess, to help people and to really like, advocate for yourself. And I'm, that's what helps me feel more confident in the major is just the fact that I already have some experience in that major. So it helps me along the way. When it comes to my academics.

Overall, all participants were careful with their choices, researching and taking classes in those disciplines to ensure they truly wanted those majors. Some took assessments, worked with their advisors, and talked to peers before settling on their decisions. Tony shared

I was undeclared for my major for I think my first two years, I think my sophomore year was when I declared for my major which is language, Business and culture with a minor in psychology, and a concentration in Spanish. And up to that moment like I kind of felt like a little bit lost because I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I knew I didn't really know where to start. So I chose to do like as much as I could. I can talk to professors, I went to like seminars. I talked to my advisor, I took a lot of like self-assessments that kind of told your personality and

what that matches to. I think I made like the right decision because like, I really enjoyed my classes and I love my professors and this summer had an internship related to like my major and it was really fun. I had a great experience. So yeah, so far, it's been great.

In general, most participants shared stories that, in retrospect, had connections with their chosen majors. Eddie sold candy in High School and decided on business marketing. Pedro did a project in high school that made him see that the major he was leaning towards would not provide enough financial stability. And Sharpe's experience with financial hardships made him shift his focus from pursuing the arts to choosing something more practical. It was clear that most participants selected their majors not always focusing on passion but more on practicality, skillset, and likelihood of gaining stability once they graduated. These were clear indicators that their self-efficacy beliefs increased once they were confident in their choice.

#### ***Theme 6: The Impact of COVID-19 on Participant's Sense of Belonging***

People have a fundamental need to belong, which is especially important in a college environment. As previously reported all participants were very involved on campus and integrated well into the pre-pandemic SSU community. The pandemic was in full force during this study, and participants were still adjusting to the new normal. This new normal included quickly moving from their residence halls, a place that many felt strong connections to, back to their homes with the expectation to carry on like usual.

The impact of the pandemic was heavy during the entire interview process. All interviews took place on zoom, and it was evident that something was missing. What was missing was the in-person human connection. All participants mentioned COVID-19 as

having both an impact and an influence on their experience at SSU. In many of the narratives, participants reported feelings of isolation, issues with remote instruction, interruption to study abroad plans, lack of connection with faculty and peers, and feeling removed from their majors due to lack of access to physical buildings. All of these factors impacted each participant's sense of belonging and affected the strong connection they once felt at the institution. Tony was selected as an RA but could not begin his position because of the pandemic. He was allowed to attend training and participate in the course designed for RAs, but he missed the opportunity to engage in the role. He shared

Yeah. For the RA position. I actually couldn't start this year because of COVID19 but I still took the class that is required for all RAs. And for my semester project , my partner was an RA so I got out to hear a lot of experiences of what she did. So that was really interesting.

Tony shared that he learned about the RA position from his peers who were former RAs, and in a sense, he got to live vicariously through them, but due to COVID-19, he lost that opportunity to experience the role first hand. Similarly, Pedro, who was in the middle of a study abroad program at Disney, was asked to forfeit the rest of his experience and fly back home. Additionally, Pedro struggled with remote instruction and learning during the pandemic and admitted to feeling removed from his major. He shared

So one of those things that I feel would make me more connected to the major is actually being on campus, and being able to get like that hands on experience of being in the major because if I'm being honest, I don't feel 100% connected right now with the major, because we're at home in a pandemic, not even being in the classroom, just being on a zoom call listening to our professor. Yeah, and the

environment is kind of iffy, because sometimes Wi Fi might disconnect. Or maybe the professor doesn't know how to get on zoom sometimes.

Pedro's narrative reveals that feeling connected to his major, especially having decided on the major, impacted his sense of belonging because he desired to belong to the Family Science and Human Development major. Pedro also shared how the pandemic impacted his motivation due to being home and disconnected from campus and his peers. Pedro explained,

Because especially right now with the pandemic, I feel like I'm a little less motivated to like being in school because we're at home and the atmosphere has changed.

He also described how he felt the university should respond to students dealing with the pandemic and shared

I feel that in order for students to be more connected with SSU, then it'll be a little bit more flexible right now. Because, to my understanding, there are a lot of students that are struggling right now, with the pandemic, especially me, and I feel that they should have flexible options for students that may or may not be doing so well in college right now, because of the environments they are living in.

As a transfer student who commuted his first semester at SSU, Pedro faced challenges adjusting, as many other students did, and felt he lost many connections due to the pandemic. Pedro explained

So as funny as it sounds, I was connected in my dorm, okay. Because, well, two places, my dorm and also University College because I love going to their events all the time. Especially promoting my students to go to the events. I'm always

telling them- pre-pandemic, I would always be like, if you guys want to go to an event, and you're the type of person that's shy, or you don't know anyone, I'll go with you. Like, it's okay. You know, so I always feel like University College is like my home. But also, so is my dorm. If it wasn't for my dorm, I wouldn't have met the people that I met, because I made so many friends while being in my dorm. And it's just like, it was just a great experience for me, because my first semester of being at SSU, I didn't dorm.

It was clear that Pedro's sense of belonging and motivation was dependent on his on-campus experiences in his role as a University Fellow, and especially with living on campus. Being a part of the residential community at SSU was one of the things that connected Pedro the most to the institution. Once things became more manageable, and the students were back on campus, the UC fellows reconnected with their first-year students by participating in person in the classroom once a week. Moreover, all participants shared their disconnect from campus and majors due to COVID; some felt lonely being at home and missed their dorm rooms; others struggled with remote instruction. For example, Jones shared that his feelings of isolation increased because of the pandemic, and he often struggled to fit in pre-covid. The pandemic caused him some added anxiety. Jones explained

Um, regardless of where I am, it is still the same. It's not just with that, it's with the other group too. I just feel more isolated than before the pandemic came, it's just like, being always remote. It's still the same. It's a little worse.

Sharpe discussed feeling physically disconnected from the campus because of the pandemic as he explained that before the pandemic, he spent a great deal of time in the School of Business. He shared

The School of Business was before the pandemic, it was a hotspot, there used to be like a cafe downstairs, and I used to get a smoothie there all the time. So it was always someone that was coming and giving presentations. So that was definitely great. But now obviously, with the pandemic, where sometimes that building isn't even open, like the doors are locked. Over the weekends, I used to love going to the top and sitting in there, doing my homework. Now, I can't even do that some days. So I would say that that's probably the way I feel disconnected, just not having that business environment of constant opportunities always around me.

However, while most of the impact of the pandemic was negative, it also revealed just how much more resilient these participants were and influenced many of them to look for alternate ways to engage in the campus community. For example, once students returned to campus with specific rules and restrictions during the pandemic, Eddie took the initiative to organize an intramural football game. He invited his peers to participate on the weekends. He shared

What I started doing now, because of COVID. Well they had something called open field play, in the past for intramural sports and you had to pay your fee form a little team. Now it is like open field play so we have a field on campus. And they have flag football available. Like the first day it was me and like a group of three including myself, we just went down to the field to play football. Then we added another person. That group of three gradually rose, because I started

picking up more people. I would say hey you want to play football on the weekend. Now the group's pretty big. Like, it's almost like 15 people. So, that alone made me more connected with all the people on campus because Covid made it hard to hang out with people and have fun, but being able to play flag football Sunday is like very fun. It kind of reminds me of a high school gym where it's like fooling around, or whatever. But I just felt very inclusive or very, very like included in those groups I mentioned.

Eddie recognized what was lacking in his experience at SSU due to the pandemic and found ways to fill those voids. He also took advantage of the remote experience and found a social media internship online, an area of marketing that he was not initially interested in but now will continue to explore. Other participants, like Sharpe and Tony, also used the pandemic to refocus on their academic goals. Sharpe began to hone his finance skills and started researching the stock market and real estate, and Tony secured an internship online.

As illustrated in the narratives, having a strong sense of belonging has been a salient feature of each participant's experience at SSU, and the COVID-19 pandemic reduced their sense of belonging because it affected their connections to their peers, faculty and staff, motivation and engagement with major, and connection to the overall campus community.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided in-depth narratives of six African American and Latino male's experiences with selecting their college majors. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the process of selecting a college major for African American and

Latino male students, and whether these decisions influenced their sense of belonging and development of self-efficacy, as it relates to persistence and retention at a four-year public institution in the northeast region of the United States. The analysis of my findings revealed that selecting their majors influenced the participant's sense of belonging and development of self-efficacy based on the six themes discussed in the findings. The emergent themes were family involvement and expectations, the importance of campus involvement on sense of belonging, the influence of faculty relationships on sense of belonging and self-efficacy, the role of academic advising in the major selection process, stability and practicality in major choice, and impact of COVID-19 on sense of belonging. Because both sense of belonging and self-efficacy are connected with persistence and retention, the findings of this study indicate that if these students continue to develop strong connections with faculty, staff and peers, as well as continue to do well academically, they will likely persist to the following semester, and ultimately graduate. Chapter six will conclude this study and will offer a discussion on my findings, implications and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Discussion, Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusion**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study was to explore what it was like for African American and Latino male students to select a college major and whether these decisions influenced their sense of belonging and development of self-efficacy, as it relates to persistence and retention. I used a narrative inquiry design to learn about six participants' experiences and life at Sunny Skies University through their personal stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lewis, 2014). The participants were selected because they all met the criteria discussed in chapter three.

I used Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Space to analyze each story. Through these stories and the rich data collected, I was able to identify the six themes discussed in chapter five. This chapter explained how African American and Latino male students experienced selecting a major and how their journey influenced their sense of belonging and self-efficacy and ultimately impacted their persistence and retention. Additionally, in this chapter, I discussed the major findings and their connection to the literature review and theoretical framework pertaining to African American and Latino male students and answered my research questions. This chapter also discussed the study's limitations and implications for policy, practice, leadership, and research. Finally, I concluded this chapter with recommendations of areas for further research.

## **Answering the Research Questions**

### ***Research Question 1: How Do African American And Latino Males Describe Their Experiences With Deciding And Selecting A College Major?***

**Family Involvement and Expectations.** African American and Latino males described their experiences with deciding and selecting a college major as a function of family influence, academic advising, and stability and practicality in the major choice. Participants described these experiences by first discussing their family's level of involvement in the major selection process and their family's expectations for what types of majors they chose. My study found that the experiences of African American and Latino males with deciding and selecting a college major were rooted in their desire to choose a major that would provide stability and practicality, but also one that would make their families proud. This was particularly true for those participants whose families were very involved in the process and had specific expectations of their choices. However, although both groups were motivated by making their family proud and desired to pay them back, one participant's lack of family involvement motivated him to do well.

The existing literature related to family influence on African American and Latino males does support the notion that family or familismo are essential systems of support for both of these groups (Berrios-Allen, 2005; Ceballo et al., 2014; Ma, 2009; Sáenz et al., 2018). But while some literature indicated that family influence was important in how African American and Latino males selected a major (Berrios-Allen, 2005; Ma, 2009) it is worth noting that there was not a lot of research that highlighted the cultural differences and influence of family on why African American and Latino males may choose certain occupations and or majors. Many studies focused on these populations

separately, but few studies examined them as one group. Additionally, not all participants were first-generation college students by traditional definition; three of the participant's parents had college degrees from their countries of origin, while the other participants' parents never attended college. For the participants whose parents were college-educated in their home country, there was a clear expectation to attend college. These students fall into a category that Freeman (2005) described as the "automatic college choice," which meant that these students never questioned whether they would attend; they automatically knew they would (p. 43). Additionally, Freeman (2005) furthered the research on college choice more specific to African American students. She described one type of student as the "knowers," students who always knew they would be attending college. The participants in my study whose parents were college-educated fell into this category.

However, regardless of their parent's educational background, one thing was clear. Each participant was motivated to pay it forward and inspired to do well because of their parent's hard work and sacrifice. Many of the participants, who were first-generation college students, shared stories of how their parents' lack of education and or immigration status proved to be challenging growing up. Therefore they wanted the opportunity to create a better life for themselves and, in return, help their parents and family.

Additionally, participants shared examples related to finding a balance between a major they would enjoy and one that provided them stability. Moreover, as participants explored their options, a commonality that continued to emerge was the idea of choosing a major that would lead to finding a practical job or career. The goal was to gain a better quality of life, which meant placing stability and practicality over passion.

Ponjuan et al. (2015) cited one study by Ceballo et al. (2014), which indicated

that Latino males' educational attainment was inspired by their desire to "give back" to their parents, and this was consistent with the findings of my study. However, in Ponjuan et al.'s. (2005) study, the role of the family, was limited to only explaining why Latino males enrolled in college versus how the family may have influenced their choice of study or career path. Most participants discussed making their family proud and "giving back" to them by graduating college and becoming successful. Another study on African American males' interests and self-efficacy on careers indicated that African Americans emphasize family and community (McCurtis & Speight, 2009). Still, there is limited research that highlights family influences on career choice and major for African American and Latino males. However, a noticeable difference is literature that speaks to the actual influence of family in terms of the major decision-making process for African American and Latino males. Therefore my study may contribute to the existing research on the influence of family on African American and Latino males as it relates to choosing a major. The findings of this study indicated that African American and Latino males valued the experiences, expectations, advice, and expertise with specific fields of their family members, especially parents and siblings when it came to selecting a major and choosing a career path.

**The Role of Academic Advising in the Major Selection Process.** African American and Latino males also described their experience selecting a major by discussing their academic advisors' role in this process. Out of all the different actions each participant took to explore a major, the most impactful was seeking guidance from their academic advisors. According to most participants, meeting with their academic advisor was beneficial to their decision-making process. Academic advising is a

developmental process that involves forming a partnership between the advisor and the student where each person will take responsibility for the advising relationship.

Participants cited both positive and negative experiences with academic advising in general. Still, one commonality amongst all participants was how much they valued meeting with the general advisors in University College. Since the majority of the participants began as undeclared majors, they were required to meet with the general advisors before they selected a major, however for the one participant who already declared a major at the onset of his college career, he did express a positive relationship with his assigned faculty advisor. Participants described the interactions and meetings with their UC advisors as meaningful. UC advisors helped these students explore majors, complete assessments and inventories, and offered advice and recommendations for navigating the major selection process. Some of the advisors also served as the participant's new student seminar instructors, and participants discussed the classroom experiences as enriching and beneficial towards their exploration of majors.

Academic advising has undoubtedly been proven to be a factor that influences student success in college and contributes to student retention (Cuseo, 2003; DeLaRosby, 2017; Tinto, 1993; Young-Jones et al., 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2013). The literature on academic advising and the major selection process is quite significant (Alvarado, 2017; DeLaRosby, 2017; Ellingham, 2018; Jaradat & Mustafa, 2017; Kot, 2014; Miller & Murray, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2010; Roscoe, 2015; Strayhorn, 2014; Torres et al., 2006; Young-Jones et al., 2013), however, there was limited research that explored the explicit relationship between academic advising and the major selection process for African American and Latino males.

Each participant in this study described the role of academic advising in their major selection process as positive and very active. While the concept of academic advising has been widely studied and recognized as a retention strategy in colleges and universities (Cuseo, 2003; DeLaRosby, 2017; Tinto, 1993; Young-Jones et al., 2013; Soria & Stebleton, 2013), it should be noted that not all academic advising structures are the same, and all advisement is not always done well. For academic advising to be impactful, it must be meaningful, intentional, and focused on helping the student establish and accomplish specific goals.

The findings of this study agreed with Strayhorn's (2014) research on the role of academic advisors in helping students achieve their goals. The findings in this study indicated that each participant's academic advisor had a role in helping the participants declare a major because they assisted them in choosing courses, completing assessments, and researching different major options, all while encouraging the student to take ownership of their own process.

***Research Question 2: What Role Does Self-Efficacy and Sense of Belonging Play in the Story of How African American and Latino Males Decide on a Major?***

**The Influence of Faculty and Staff Relationships on Sense of Belonging and Self-Efficacy.** The findings in my study suggested that when participants established a strong relationship with professors in their chosen major, they were more confident in their academic abilities and more likely to do well, thus increasing their self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy beliefs. This new confidence also impacted the sense of belonging amongst participants because not only did they feel like they could do the work academically in their majors, but they also felt a connection to the department and the

university as a whole. Participants' confidence in their ability to do well in their courses and feedback from professors gave them higher levels of self-efficacy, which is directly related to their persistence and retention.

Participants described feeling supportive and like they mattered when faculty and staff were empathetic to their experiences in and out of the classroom. This was particularly evident when some participants shared their struggles with the remote learning environment during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings illustrated that connecting with faculty beyond the coursework was also important to the participants when choosing their majors. The African American and Latino males in the study described feeling happy and excited when they could make meaningful connections with high-level administrators like college Deans and Directors.

The participants also shared that connecting with faculty and staff beyond the classroom made them feel valued and more excited to learn and immerse themselves in the university environment and academic programs/majors. The findings in this study revealed that participants demonstrated self-efficacy in their majors when they believed that they were in a supportive environment and that their professors cared about their learning and well-being as students. The participants immediately felt more confident in their academic abilities.

Gloria and Hird's (1999) study about career development and self-efficacy focused on measuring the student's level of career self-efficacy based on how they responded to a questionnaire about their ability to complete specific tasks. However, it did not highlight any additional influences that may have supported career self-efficacy, such as faculty and staff support. This study and this finding offer additional insight into

the importance of faculty and staff relationships related to self-efficacy and sense of belonging and the experiences of African American and Latino males. Still, while there is a significant amount of research that does connect self-efficacy with decision-making and career development of students (Gloria & Hird, 1999; Johnson & Muse, 1999; Kelly & Hatcher, 2013; Lent & Hackett, 1987; Lent et al., 1994; Komarraju et al., 2014), they do not explain whether there was a link between self-efficacy and the major selection process. Johnson and Muse's (1999) study on self-efficacy and the major selection process only focused on males in general and did specifically highlight the experiences of African American and Latino males.

Several scholars discussed the importance of cultivating positive relationships with faculty as it helps the student establish a strong sense of belonging, which impacts retention and persistence (Johnson et al., 2007; Soria & Stableton, 2013; Strayhorn, 2014; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Núñez (2009) also found positive outcomes related to sense of belonging when faculty members displayed an interest in forming relationships with Latino students. Beggs et al. (2008) found that for students in business majors, a large emphasis was placed on faculty reputation and accessibility as important factors for students who chose this major.

**The Importance Campus Involvement and Sense of Belonging.** The findings in this study indicated that having a strong sense of belonging was also highlighted among participants as an area that directly impacted their persistence and retention. Participants described connections with staff on campus (dining staff, security guards, etc.) as impacting their sense of belonging. Sense of belonging was undoubtedly salient throughout my research. All of the factors noted, and stories shared about their

experiences at SSU all related to an increase in their sense of belonging. In particular, living on campus gave students a strong sense of belonging. Working as Resident Assistants also helped students feel supportive, connected, and valued as members of SSU. Participants involved in campus organizations (Greek life, SGA, club members) felt a strong sense of belonging. Campus involvement also contributed positively to developing a strong sense of belonging.

Strayhorn (2012) notes that when students are involved in activities that help them develop meaningful relationships with faculty and peers, it helps them establish a sense of belonging and keeps them engaged. However, although the idea is that students become involved on campus, not all students may have the opportunity to do so. Strayhorn's (2012) research on Latino male student engagement and involvement indicated that "financial challenges" and reliance on student aid (loans, grants, etc.), as well as feeling pressure to work while in school to support their families, limited the amount of time students were able to dedicate to extracurricular activities and involvement opportunities; these students spent the majority of their time outside of classes, working to help pay off these loans (p. 13). This research differed from what I found in my study, which was that African American males found value in becoming involved on campus and believed it helped them stay engaged and motivated to persist and provided them with transferable skills for their resumes. By participating in student clubs, leadership roles, and jobs on campus such as a Resident Assistant, these students developed a strong sense of belonging.

Moreover, the contrast between Strayhorn's (2012) findings about campus involvement for Latino males, and the findings in this research, is that the students in my

study still wanted to help their families. Still, they planned to do so once they graduated from college. The participants in my research did not necessarily feel the pressure to work full-time to support their families while in college. Scholars argue that students develop a strong sense of belonging once they adjust and acclimate to their college environment (Soria & Stebelton, 2012). Likewise, sense of belonging is directly related to persistence and retention for both African American and Latino males (Brooms, 2019; Garcia & Garza, 2016; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Leslie et al., 2007; Museus et al., Saelua, 2017; Núñez, 2009; Rainey et al., 2018; Sánchez et al., 2005; Strayhorn, 2008; 2012). It is also essential to note seminal research like Astin's (1984) involvement theory which indicated that student involvement is directly related to persistence. Astin (1984) defined involvement as the "amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). Therefore, Astin (1984) concluded that an "involved student" took part in various activities on campus, such as athletics membership in clubs and organizations, and dedicated a substantial amount of time to studying and connecting with peers and faculty (p. 518). This, in turn, helped the student develop a strong sense of belonging, which also motivated that student to remain at the institution. Participants gained mentors due to their campus involvement, such as UC advisors, UC Deans, and Residence life Directors. Strayhorn (2012) asserted that what students do on campus in terms of involvement can "diminish" their sense of belonging (p. 120). It will be essential to enact policies that promote students' sense of belonging, especially related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I discussed this further in my implications and recommendations section.

**The Impact of Covid-19 on Sense of Belonging.** This study took place during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I would be remiss if I did not include the pandemic's impact on the participant's experience at SSU. In particular, COVID-19 significantly impacted the participant's sense of belonging. Participants in this study described feeling disconnected from the campus, which caused them to feel isolated and impacted their sense of belonging. Sense of belonging, by definition, is the "experience of personal involvement and integration within a system or environment to the extent that a person feels they play a special role in that system or environment" (Strayhorn, 2010, p. 63). When you no longer have access to people and therefore do not feel connected or integrated into the campus community because you are now experiencing it in a remote setting, it will undoubtedly affect your sense of belonging. The participants in this study described their experiences navigating their college experience during the COVID-19 as challenging and at times isolating. Soria & Stebleton's (2013) research on first-generation students' academic engagement and retention describes the importance of establishing a sense of belonging on academic engagement.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how higher education institutions conduct business and has inevitably affected all students. Higher education institutions had to adapt quickly to the global pandemic and alter their services to better support student success. Some of these alterations made it very challenging for students to navigate their college experience and, in some cases, negatively affected their mental health and overall sense of belonging to the institution (Patel, 2020; Potts, 2021). Although the research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on colleges and universities is still limited, there are a few studies published within the last two years (Patel, 2020; Potts, 2021) that

describe the impact of the pandemic on students. Patel (2020) described the impact the pandemic has had on all students, but particularly vulnerable populations like first-generation students and low-income students, and noted that while colleges have provided access to these students, they must now find ways to get them to persist while navigating the evolving pandemic.

Additionally, Soria & Stebleton (2013) also noted that "when students are not as engaged in college, their overall experiences can be isolating and disconnecting", therefore supporting the findings in this study that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the participant's ability to fully engage at the institution, thus impacting their sense of belonging (p.675). Likewise, Potts' (2021) study on first-year students' sense of belonging during the pandemic, found that the COVID-19 pandemic affected students' ability to make new friends and limited engagement opportunities on campus, all things that are needed for students to achieve a sense of belonging. However, while the findings of Pott's (2021) study highlight important changes, this study only examines the experiences of first-year students at a predominantly white liberal arts college. Patel (2020) discussed factors such as the impact on mental health, lack of resources at home such as internet access, loss of wages from not being able to work during the pandemic, and difficulty with remote learning, as some of the biggest challenges students are facing. These issues, coupled with the everyday struggles and limitations that low-income students face, have now illuminated the systemic and obvious gaps related to social capital that still exist in higher education (Patel, 2020). Like Patel's (2020) research, my study revealed similar findings. It will undoubtedly contribute to a better understanding of how the pandemic has affected African American and Latino

male students' sense of belonging, academic performance, and self-efficacy beliefs.

***Research Question 3: What Factors Contributed to How African American and Latino Male Students Experienced Selecting their Major?***

The factors that contributed to how African American and Latino male students experienced selecting their major as follows: having a supportive environment within the academic program, access to academic advisement, making a meaningful connection with a faculty or staff member, and lastly, feeling engaged, connected and motivated by participating in campus activities. However, the most important factors that contributed to how they experienced selecting their majors were based on their background and experiences, which led participants to choose majors that would afford them stability and practicality.

**Stability and Practicality in Major Choice.** Financial implications, career, and economics of the major were significant for participants who wanted to choose a major that would provide them with a better quality of life and more career opportunities. Most of the participants did cite some type of financial aspect of choosing their majors. While many were motivated by choosing something they were good at, participants were also mindful that having financial stability was critical to their success once graduating. Experience growing up with financial hardships and seeing success in others (siblings) motivated the participants to choose majors that would have more career options. Participants also learned of different career options within the major from conversations with faculty and recommendations from their advisors.

In terms of the actual selection of majors, participants were intentional when deciding on particular majors. For the undeclared participants, many set out on exploring

majors by attending events and workshops or taking introductory courses in different areas. Five of the six participants applied as undeclared, and one applied as an Accounting major but later changed his concentration to Marketing. Moreover, while most of the participants chose a major in business (4 out of the 6), almost all of them expressed an early interest in a major in STEM. This was similar to Ma's (2009) research on gender differences, which found more males in technical and business fields than women at four-year institutions. However, research on gender difference and male choice is common. At the same time, there is still an absence of more research explicitly examining African American and Latino males and their choice of majors.

Like Beggs et al. (2008) study on distinguishing factors in college major choice, this study also found that students emphasized the psycho-social benefits of choosing a major. The participants in this study discussed how it was important to them to find a major that their family also supported. Interestingly, the findings in this study did not highlight the importance of peer influence in choosing a major, which was noted in previous research (Beggs et al., 2008; Musoba et al., 2018), as it was mostly stability and practicality and family influence and support that mattered to them. Participants did not rely on peers but instead on their background and experience with their majors as another factor for choosing a major.

Moreover, the existing literature also described factors such as job characteristics (Bordon & Fu, 2015) as important, which the findings of this study also support. Participants described wanting to find jobs where they could be creative or have the ability to help others. Another factor that was absent from this study but that was highlighted as important in previous studies was the timing of when the decision was made. Bordon & Fu

(2015) and Musoba et al. (2018) both discussed timing as a factor of how students choose a major. In this study, participants did not express feeling pressure to declare by a specific time, but many of them ended up choosing majors by the end of their sophomore year.

## **Implications for Practice/Leadership, Policy, and Research**

### ***Practice and Leadership***

The findings from this narrative inquiry study and the literature review provided several implications for higher education institutions to help support the persistence and retention of African American and Latino males. This study revealed that when African American and Latino males engaged in major exploration activities, worked on campus, or connected with a faculty member or academic advisor, they increased their sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Therefore, institutions can use this information to create more opportunities for those less engaged African American and Latino males to access these same experiences and opportunities. Participants shared examples of how peer mentoring opportunities helped them connect with faculty and staff. Participants also shared that working as University Fellows in the advisement center provided more access to academic resources and advisors. Therefore, Deans and Directors of Academic advisement centers may want to focus more effort on creating different systems of support for at-risk student populations. The departments should consider expanding this type of leadership opportunity to more students and perhaps focusing on undeclared students or those who may be struggling academically to keep them engaged. One idea may be to create or establish a leadership curriculum or course that would teach students several leadership theories and offer a more diverse range of exposure to leadership topics and experiences. These findings can help establish a new model or framework that

applies to academic advisement across the university.

Likewise, many studies about academic advising and the major selection process take place at predominantly white institutions, whereas my research took place at a recently designated Hispanic Serving Institution. The findings did not illustrate whether or not there were any systems in place or new initiatives set up to support students of color, specifically African American and Latino males, at this newly designated HSI. Therefore, the findings of this study will have implications for practice in this area as there are opportunities to further the discourse related to what HSIs should be doing to support students of color in their major exploration process.

We know that the research on African American and Latino males still suggests that although the college attendance rates have increased significantly in the last several years (Roscoe, 2015), these students are graduating at a lesser rates than their white counterparts (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Knight-Manuel et al., 2019; Mulvey, 2009) and are still lagging behind women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Therefore to help address some of these implications, using information derived from this study to highlight the success of these participants may help create new programs and policies to support the overall retention and persistence of all African American and Latino males. Additionally, because I used Harper's (2012) Anti-deficit achievement framework, the African American and Latino males in this study were highly motivated and resilient young men. The majority of them were extremely involved in various campus leadership roles. The participants in this study shared their stories of selecting their majors. University leadership should also implement using aspects of Harper's anti-deficit approach when working with males of color as a way to highlight their successes

and motivate this population towards continued success. These experiences can help develop institutional best practices to help with retention and persistence, especially for their peers who may be less active or struggling academically.

### ***Policy***

The findings of this study have implications for institutional policy for Admissions departments and academic advising at the major department level. Admissions departments should create more opportunities beyond open houses and admitted student days, allowing for major exploration earlier on in the recruitment process and before matriculation. This is especially true for students who are undeclared/undecided. Additionally, because most higher education institutions have specific policies in place related to how and when students must choose their academic majors, as well as the requirements to get into some majors, the findings in this study suggest that creating a pathway for students who are not able to get into majors with specific requirements like the Arts can help retain students. For example, one participant used the arts as therapy, and being rejected from the major so many times was very harmful to his self-esteem and affected his sense of belonging. Academic departments must examine their policies and remove existing barriers that limit access to some majors for marginalized students. Additionally, these stories can help inform policies related to academic advising done by faculty. There were significant examples of the participants preferring to see generalist advisors in University College instead of their faculty advisors.

## ***Research***

The findings also suggested areas for future research. For example, this study only looked at upper-classmen and excluded first-year students. It may be beneficial to study African American and Latino male first-year students and how they select their majors. In particular, it may be interesting to explore where they get their source of information related to choosing a major. Are these students receiving information from their families, high school guidance counselors, or from the admission department itself? Because the findings of this study provided insight into the journey of students who were already involved on campus and acclimated to the community, it may be helpful to compare these experiences with those of first-year students beginning their journey.

One aspect missing in the extant research was a link between academic advising and the cultural competency of the academic advisor. And while I expected to see more evidence of this in my findings, I was surprised by the little emphasis that participants placed on their academic advisor's ability to be culturally sensitive to their needs. Therefore, this may be an area for further research. However, based on each participant's story, I can infer that their academic advisors made them feel comfortable. The participants were drawn to them based on their relatability and genuine interest in their success.

One area I did not get the opportunity to explore within this study was the concept of self-authorship as a theoretical framework. Self-authorship refers to how students grow and develop their own identity within their college experience (Barber et al., 2013). Additionally, many scholars argued that students do not typically reach self-authorship by graduation (Barber et al., 2013; Baxter Magolda, 1998). Therefore it may be helpful to

study if and how African American and Latino males experience self-authorship in the major selection process. In my literature review, I discussed how self-authorship had been linked to both sense of belonging and self-efficacy. However, my findings did not reveal enough information to determine if the participants reached self-authoring ways due to selecting their majors. Additionally, I had already identified a gap in the existing research about self-authorship related exclusively to African American and Latino males. Therefore, examining African American and Latino males' experiences with selecting a major and how they may or may not reach self-authorship can help explain what systems may need to be put in place to support the success of these students. Another area that would be interesting to explore is future research that expands this study and examines the experiences of foreign-born students and their families' expectations about attending college and their selection of majors. For example, several of my participants were born outside of the United States and indicated an expectation that they would attend college because their parents were college-educated abroad. This phenomenon may be an area that could provide fascinating findings on how foreign-born students experience selecting a college major.

### **Recommendations**

The success of African American and Latino males depends on having multiple systems of support set up on college campuses. These can be physical spaces that provide a welcoming space, clubs, and organizations that speak to their interests, or in more deliberate and structured programs to promote more access to faculty and staff outside of the traditional classroom setting. The findings of this study offer two recommendations that may assist practitioners with supporting the success of African American and Latino

male students.

### ***Online Training Modules for Faculty Advisors***

Institutions with complex academic advising systems, such as general advising for undeclared students and advisement at the department level, may benefit from cross-training opportunities to engage in best practices. Academic advising is most effective when it is developmental. However, in recognizing that faculty members are most experienced in teaching and research and often prioritize these things above advising students, it may be helpful to provide resources to help faculty provide more effective advising. Additionally, not all faculty advisors are familiar with or trained to do academic advising. Still, many institutions expect that faculty will also advise students in their majors. Faculty advisors may be better suited to provide advising related to career development in that major. In contrast, professional advisors may be more skilled at providing support, mentorship, and guidance on exploring various majors and making the most of their major once declared.

Additionally, with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the students in this study did have feelings of isolation and struggled with motivation. Although all students faced challenges through the pandemic, students of color were most vulnerable (Patel, 2020). Likewise, developing cultural competency may be another area that can be further developed through an advisement community. It may be helpful for all faculty to understand the complexities of working with African American and Latino male students. Therefore, creating an online advisement community where resources and best practices are shared may be beneficial for both groups to maintain a more consistent advising system across the board and to further support African American and Latino males.

### ***Faculty and Staff Mentorship***

Another area that may be beneficial for African American and Latino male students is a faculty and staff mentorship program. Participants in the study referenced the varied experiences with establishing meaningful connections with campus administrators, the majority being male faculty and staff. I propose creating a faculty and staff mentorship program for men of color on campus. The purpose of this group would be for faculty and staff mentors to be connected to a male of color. Campus administrators responsible for creating such groups must also be mindful not to create barriers for interested students and be as inclusive as possible. However, research on the success of African American and Latino males as well as the findings from this study did suggest that establishing connections with faculty and staff does support sense of belonging and persistence and retention (Johnson et al., 2007; Núñez, 2009; Soria & Stableton, 2013; Strayhorn, 2014; Young-Jones et al., 2013). Although faculty and staff mentoring programs are not unique, they are not always readily available. There must be more emphasis on sustaining such a program for it to be truly impactful.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

A limitation of the study is that given that this study was conducted during a global pandemic, I could not connect with the participants the way I would have been able to had we met in person. This factor limited my study because I could not observe the student in their natural on-campus element and was not have that in-person connection. This also limited my findings because the impact of the COVID-19 was present in most aspects of their responses. This study may have produced different findings and implications. Additionally, issues with connectivity and technology made it

difficult to fully engage with participants during each interview. A delimitation of this study was that I deliberately chose to use Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework to study this population because I wanted to only look at successful students. While Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework has been used in earlier studies to address limitations that were focused on students that may not have been as successful, for this study, using Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement framework was a deliberate delimitation and not a limitation.

For example, using this framework led to all participants being involved in the same organizations on campus, such as University Fellows and Resident Assistants, and did not consider the experiences of other African American and Latino male students who may be successful in other areas. This delimitation affected the study's findings, mainly related to sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Suppose I had opened the study to consider the experiences of all African American and Latino males at SSU. In that case, it may have offered explanations and an alternative perspective that may help improve the sense of belonging and self-efficacy of all African American and Latino students and not just the "successful" ones.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the process of selecting a college major for African American and Latino male students and whether these decisions influenced their sense of belonging and the development of self-efficacy, as it relates to persistence and retention. The focus of this study was to highlight the stories of six African American and Latino males and detail their journey by honoring their voices and experiences. I chose to do a narrative inquiry study because it was essential to hear

the participant's unique stories to make meaning of their experiences. The voices of African American and Latino males are seldom heard and especially in the context of the major selection process.

This particular study took an anti-deficit perspective to highlight successful and resilient African American and Latino males as a way to challenge the status quo. The findings indicated that this group of students valued their family's rich cultural backgrounds, their myriad of experiences before and during their college careers, and their hopes and aspirations for the future to fuel their desire to succeed. Each participant's journey was different, yet they all managed to make well-informed decisions and chose majors they felt were right for them. Therefore, although the findings of this study support existing research that indicated that sense of belonging and self-efficacy were predictors of retention and persistence, this study provided another area of research related to sense of belonging and self-efficacy, but through the lens of African American and Latino males selecting a college major.

In particular, this study demonstrated how essential it is for African American and Latino males to receive solid academic advisement and support from faculty and staff on campus. Additionally, it was equally important for these students to feel connected to the campus community even while experiencing the institution virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, this study also explored the systems of support these students had in terms of family, peers, and faculty, and staff and showed that it is critical that African American and Latino males have opportunities to establish meaningful relationships with faculty and staff on campus as well as opportunities to engage with other students through involvement in campus activities and leadership organizations.

The students in this study were able to articulate through their stories how significant selecting a college major was for their growth and development. Ultimately, the participants encountered many experiences in this process that shaped their sense of belonging and self-efficacy. The time and investment that each participant put forth to carve out their plan proved that they were determined to persist. Choosing their major helped retain these students because they now felt like they belonged (sense of belonging) and were confident (self-efficacy) that they would be successful in that major. Therefore, this study filled in the gap related to how selecting a college major influences African American and Latino male students' persistence and retention. These findings provided a clearer picture of what institutions must do to continue to support the success of African American and Latino males. This study offered insight into how these students made decisions about their majors and how these decisions supported their sense of belonging and self-efficacy and ultimately helped them persist.

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## Appendix A

### Recruitment Flyer

# Understanding How African American and Latino Males Choose a Major

Do you know a successful and motivated African American or Latino male student who has an interesting story about how they selected their major?

I am seeking participants for my research study titled: Understanding How African American and Latino Males Choose a Major, and its Influence on Retention and Persistence

I am seeking participants who meet the following criteria:

- Identify as Black and or African American, and Latino and or Hispanic male, or a mix of both of these backgrounds.
- Are between the ages of 18-25
- Full-time undergraduate student (sophomore, juniors, or seniors)
- Have at least a 2.75 cumulative GPA or higher
- Has selected a major or be in the process of declaring one by the end of the semester
- Have a compelling or interesting journey/story about choosing their major

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study is to explore what it is like for African American and Latino male students to select a college major and whether these decisions have an influence on their sense of belonging and development of self-efficacy, as it relates to persistence and retention.

This study will include a two-part interview that will each last roughly 90 minutes  
The study will be conducted virtually at Sunny Skies University using Zoom.

All subjects who fully participate in the study will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

#### Contact Information of research team:

Dr. Monica Reid Kerrigan  
[kerriganm@rowan.edu](mailto:kerriganm@rowan.edu)  
856-256-4500 x53658

Yosayra F. Solano  
[solano32@students.rowan.edu](mailto:solano32@students.rowan.edu)

This study has been approved by Rowan University's IRB (Study # PRO 2020-52)

## Appendix B

### Consent Form

Please read and electronically sign a copy of the consent form. You keep will a copy for your own personal records and I will keep a copy for my own personal records. Should have any questions regarding this study, you can email me at [yosayra.solano@gmail.com](mailto:yosayra.solano@gmail.com).

I \_\_\_\_\_, give my full consent to participate in Yosayra Solano’s research study titled “Understanding How African American and Latino Males Choose a Major, and Its Influence on Retention and Persistence. I fully understand I will be sharing my story regarding my own personal experiences at Sunny Skies University. I also understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and that I can withdraw myself from the study at any moment without penalty or retaliation. I also know that my information will be discarded upon the completion of the study.

To practiced confidentiality and protect my identity, Ms. Yosayra Solano will use a pseudonym and will secure my responses in an undisclosed location on her laptop. All record will be deleted upon the completion of study.

If I would like a copy of the finding of the study, I can email Ms. Yosayra Solano at [yosayra.solano@gmail.com](mailto:yosayra.solano@gmail.com).

I understand that my participation in this research will require answering interview questions in two different sessions that will take approximately 90 minutes to two hours. I may refrain from answering any question at any time during the interview without facing any repercussion.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Audio/Video Consent Form

#### ROWAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD AUDIO/VIDEOTAPE ADDENDUM TO CONSENT FORM

You have already agreed to participate in a research study conducted by Ms. Yosayra Solano. We are asking for your permission to allow us to video and audio record your session via Zoom as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for data analysis by the research team. Specifically, as the principle investigator, I will be transcribing the video recording via Zoom and then looking for emerging themes and patterns that comes out of the interview.

The recording(s) will include your name and the answers to the interview questions. However, your identity will not be used during the analysis of data.

The recording(s) will be stored in a locked file on my personal laptop that requires a password to access it, and transferred to the Rowan University secured server via google drive. Only I will have access to it. Once the study is done, I will be destroying the data that was retrieved.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Investigator/Person Obtaining Consent: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview Protocol Part I**

#### **Introduction**

My name is Yosayra Solano and I am a 4<sup>th</sup> year doctoral candidate at Rowan University studying Higher Education/Educational Leadership. I am conducting this study under the leadership and guidelines of my Chair, Dr. Monica Reid Kerrigan. I'd like to thank you once again for participating in the interview aspect of my study. This will serve as part one of a series of two virtual interviews.

As I mentioned in my email, my study seeks to understand and examine the experiences of African American and Latino males with choosing a college major. This study also seeks to explore whether these decisions have an influence on African American and Latino male's sense of belonging and development of self-efficacy as it relates to persistence and retention at a four-year public institution.

[Pause to check for understanding on whether the student knows what sense of belonging and self-efficacy mean; depending on response, explain]

The bigger picture is to document the process through storytelling in order to get rich data and information.

Our interview today will last approximately one hour, and I will be asking you to share your experiences with selecting your college major. Because this interview format is centered on storytelling, I am asking you to please tell me your story. There is no right or wrong way to answer my questions, I just ask that you are honest and open about your journey. I will be providing questions as well as prompts to help you tell your story. Think of this as a casual conversation about your journey to higher education and choosing your major.

I have a copy of the informed consent form that I have emailed you in advance. While you have already emailed confirming your consent, I would like to ask that you verbally consent prior to us beginning the interview since it is taking place virtually.

[Review aspects of consent form].

The consent form also asks about audio and video recording the interview. Are you still ok with me recording this video conversation today? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

**If yes:** Thank you! Please note that if there is anything you are not comfortable sharing on video, I can pause the recording at any time. I can also omit anything you like from the transcript once you review the transcription. Is that alright with you?

[Wait for response, and if participant says yes, then continue]

**If no:** Thank them for their time but inform them, you cannot move forward with the interview since it can only be done virtually.

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions?

[Discuss questions] If any questions (or other questions) arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be happy to stop at any point and answer your questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do African American and Latino males describe their experiences with deciding and selecting a college major?
2. What role does Self-Efficacy and Sense of Belonging play in the story of how African American and Latino males decide on a major?
3. What factors contributed to how African American and Latino male students experienced selecting their major?

I will be using Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2011) 4 Phase Model for Narrative Interviewing

- Phase 1: is the initiation stage and formulation of the topic.
- Phase 2: is the main narration and encourages the interviewee to tell their story by not interrupting and only giving non-verbal cues
- Phase 3: is called the questioning phase and is meant to guide the interviewer in asking open-ended questions and limits their input.
- Phase 4: last phase is the concluding talk which ends the interview, stops the recording and asks follow-up why questions.

### **Interview Questions:**

#### **Phase 1: Initiation Stage/Opening Questions**

1. Tell me about your experience at SSU.
2. What has inspired you to pursue a college degree?
  - a. Why did you choose this university?
3. Please tell me a little bit about your family background.

#### **Phase 2: Main Narration**

4. Tell me about your academic journey at this college.
  - a. What is your college major? How did you decide upon this major?
  - b. What was your process for picking your major? What were the steps you took to choose your major?
  - c. Were there other majors you wanted to pursue but could not. If you had to do it over, what would you have chosen?
  - d. How confident were you in declaring your major?  
Follow up
  - e. What do you plan to do with your major after college? Explain whether you feel adequately prepared? - follow up for part II
5. What is it like to be an *African American or Latino Male* in your academic major?
6. What makes you feel most connected or disconnected to your major?
7. In what ways do you feel confident in your studies? What types of things make you feel confident?
  - a. Do you have any experiences where you doubted your academic abilities in your major?

### **Phase 3: Questioning Phase**

8. What are some things or experiences that make you feel like you belong or fit in your academic department?
  - a. In what way(s) did you feel like you belonged in your academic major once you declared?
  - b. How did you feel included in your academic major?
  - c. What support resources have you taken advantage of while in college? (i.e., tutoring etc.).
  - d. What support services do you feel have helped you the most?
9. Where do you feel you most belong or feel most connected to on campus?
  - a. What could the university do to help you feel more connected?

### **Phase 4: Concluding Talk/End of Interview**

#### **Closing**

Thank you so much for speaking with me today. This has been very helpful, and you have given me a lot of important and useful information. To help protect your identity I will be assigning an alias to you.

[Explain Part II of the interview process]

As I previously mentioned, I would like to meet with you again for a second interview. The purpose of this next interview is to follow up on this initial conversation. I will be sending you a transcript of our discussion and will provide you an opportunity to clarify any of your responses and or add any new information. I will be helping you piece together your story for accuracy and ensure I represent you appropriately.

Additionally, I am asking that you email me an annal and chronicle in the form of a graphic picture or timeline of important dates and events related to your story.

[I will email you examples of what this prior to the next interview]

There is no right or wrong way to do this, as I will leave it up to your imagination. I will send you instructions and details regarding this when I email your transcript.

Would you like to schedule that meeting now? [wait for response]. I will send you a follow up email with more information and details about our next meeting.

[Ask participant if using Zoom worked well for them, or if they prefer a different video conferencing tool]

[Confirm contact information in case it has changed since last correspondence]

Thank you again!

## Appendix E

### Interview Protocol Part II

#### Introduction

Hello! It's nice to see you again! Thank you for agreeing to meet with me for part II of the interview process. Again, my name is Yosayra Solano and I am a doctoral student at Rowan University studying Higher Education/Educational Leadership. This will serve as the second interview and final part of our virtual interviews.

As you may remember from our last meeting, my study seeks to understand and examine the experiences of African American and Latino males with choosing a college major. This study also seeks to explore whether these decisions have an influence on African American and Latino male's sense of belonging and development of self-efficacy as it relates to persistence and retention at a four-year public institution.

The bigger picture is to document the process through storytelling in order to get rich data and information.

The purpose of this second interview is to clarify parts of your story which I had an opportunity to transcribe. I want to be sure I am accurately portraying your words and feelings and check for understanding on your part. In addition, I would like for us to go over your annal and chronicle. Did you have an opportunity to do this?

[If yes, ask that they share it during the interview. If no, ask if they are willing to do it during the interview with your assistance].

[Depending on whether or not, participant sent edits/comments or feedback from the transcription that was emailed prior to this second meeting, ask the following:

- Thank you for taking the time to review the transcript from our last meeting. I appreciate your honesty and feedback you shared. Let's unpack some of that today so we can put all the pieces together  
or
- You did not send me any feedback or comments regarding your interview transcript, did you have anything you want to discuss about it today? If yes, allow participants to share openly and freely. If not, ask questions based on the review of the last interview.

This interview may last between 45 minutes to an hour. Just like our last meeting, please try your best to share your story. Because this interview format is centered on storytelling, I am asking you to please tell me your story. I will be providing questions as well as prompts to help you tell your story and as a follow-up to our last meeting.

Although you have already consented to participating in both interviews, I would like to ask that you verbally consent prior to us beginning this second interview.

[Ask if they would like to review aspects of consent form].

The consent form also asks about audio and video recording the interview. Are you still ok with me recording this video conversation today? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No

**If yes:** Thank you! Please note that if there is anything you are not comfortable sharing on video, I can pause the recording at any time. I can also omit anything you like from the transcript once you review the transcription. Is that alright with you?

[Wait for response, and if participant says yes, then continue]

**If no:** Thank them for their time but inform them, you cannot move forward with the interview since it can only be done virtually.

Before we begin the interview, do you have any questions?

[Discuss questions] If any questions (or other questions) arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. I would be happy to stop at any point and answer your questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do African American and Latino males describe their experiences with deciding and selecting a college major?
2. What role does Self-Efficacy and Sense of Belonging play in the story of how African American and Latino males decide on a major?
3. What factors contributed to how African American and Latino male students experienced selecting their major?

I will be using Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2011) 4 Phase Model for Narrative Interviewing

- Phase 1: is the initiation stage and formulation of the topic.
- Phase 2: is the main narration and encourages the interviewee to tell their story by not interrupting and only giving non-verbal cues
- Phase 3: is called the questioning phase and is meant to guide the interviewer in asking open-ended questions and limits their input.
- Phase 4: last phase is the concluding talk which ends the interview, stops the recording and asks follow-up why questions.

### **Interview Questions:**

Based on analysis of the first interview I will explore the following:

- Reflection on last interview
  - Has anything changed for you based on what you shared during our first interview
- Expand on impact and influence of family on college choice and major choice
- Describe desired career path and rationale for choices
- Explore a sense of belonging in college and in the academic department based on responses to questions in the first interview.
- What was the process of constructing annals and chronicles (graphic picture or timeline of important dates and events) related to your story, like for you?
- Address any follow-up questions or concerns

### **Follow-up questions:**

1. Before COVID, how often did you go home?
  - a. What kept you on campus on the weekends? i.e., clubs etc.
2. SSU/Faculty interactions
  - a. What motivated you to stay at SSU - what keeps you here
  - b. Was there ever a moment you wanted to leave?
  - c. Have they helped or reaffirmed your decision to remain in your major
  - d. What makes some faculty more approachable than others?
3. Let's talk about your family.
  - a. How did your parents/grandparents influence your decision-making process for choosing a major?
4. Tell me about a time when you did not feel accepted or included in your program or in the university.
  - a. Why did you not feel included?
5. Tell me about a time when you felt like you were a part of the campus community.
  - a. Why did you not feel included?
  - b. What support systems were in place that influenced your sense of belonging?
6. Describe your experiences with peers on campus and in your program.
7. If you could suggest something to the university administration to assist African American and Latino male students increase their sense of belonging, what would you suggest?
8. Annal and Chronicle
  - a. Could you draw for me a figure of your experiences at SSU from the time of admission to this point and with critical milestone events on it? Tell me about the milestones in your diagram.