CREATING EVE

A YOUNG SCHOLARS RESEARCH STUDY IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE AFRICAN AMERICAN POLICY FORUM

WHY COLLEGE, WHY NOW?: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF FIRST GENERATION BLACK WOMEN AND GENDER EXPANSIVE INDIVIDUALS ACROSS THE DIASPORA.
ACKNOWLEDGING THE COLLECTIVE

What is the Young Scholars Program?

The Young Scholars Program (YSP) was launched in 2020 by the African American Policy Forum. YSP is a multifaceted, innovative, intensive research internship that aims to introduce young, black female scholars to intersectional research practices, research protocols, critical intellectual inquiry, Critical Race Theory and Black feminist thought through mentorship and advocacy. During the first phase of YSP which includes a six week remote summer program, the young scholars are placed in research teams to develop, implement and create research proposals and methodologies that examine the lives of black girls, women and gender expansive youths to create their own research proposals that tackle socio-cultural and economic issues of their interest.

"Creating Eve" was founded by a group of likeminded young scholars who applied intersectional research techniques to propose the following study: Why College, Why Now?: A Comprehensive Study of First Generation Black Women and Gender Expansive Individuals Across the Diaspora.
CREATING Eve

Exploring the genesis of black women, girls and gender expansive youths in higher education, recognizing that education plays a pivotal role in self-actualization and intersectionality.

WE ARE EVE

IWPS Finals 2014 - Porsha O. "Angry Black Woman"

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Christian Herald

Christian Herald (she/her) is a student activist, leader, and organizer from Washington, DC. She currently attends the University of Richmond as a Richmond Scholar and Oliver Hill Scholar, where she serves as President of the Black Student Alliance and is the founder and editor in chief of Counterculture Magazine, U of R's first social justice publication. Christian’s research interests focus on Black women's persistence and ability to thrive in educational spaces, gender-based violence, and the intersections between capitalism and white supremacy.
Ralycia Andrews

Ralycia Andrews is a proud Garifuna, Vincentian, aspiring Biological and Cultural Anthropologist, feminist and youth activist. Currently pursuing her Bachelors in Biology with a minor in Cultural Studies at the UWI Cave Hill Campus, Andrews prides herself on partnering with institutions that support diversity, inclusion, equality and sustainability. As a Delegate of the Ubuntu Leaders Academy (UN), a MOVHERS Changemaker, a Commonwealth Youth and Peace Ambassador, her work is driven by ancestral veneration and a need for sustainable development through servant leadership. Andrews actively engages in activities that focus on Indigenous and African-American women, black historical, cultural and artistic identities and youth engagement.
Kaylen Chase

Kaylen Chase is a rising senior at Santa Clara University where she is a double major in political science and economics with a Spanish minor. She is a highly involved student serving as the incoming co-chair for Igwebuike, Santa Clara’s Black Student Union; on the Student Affairs Committee; and on search committees for high-level administration at her university. Kaylen takes pride in her Caribbean heritage and is continuously seeking to understand how immigration affects personal and sociopolitical experiences in the United States.
Why intersectionality?

As first generation college students continue to come from backgrounds that have historically been excluded from higher education, we must examine how these backgrounds intersect with the overarching identifier of “first generation.” Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw first coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989 to describe how marginalized identities can compound and create uniquely specific issues to those who are affected (Crenshaw, 1989). In her 2016 TED Talk, Crenshaw notes that it is difficult for people to understand how two marginalized identities—such as being Black, a gender minority, disabled, or queer—intersect (Crenshaw, 2016). This allows individuals to overlook the issues that face intersectional identities, such as how Black women who are victims of police brutality are often ignored in comparison to their male counterparts who faced the same violence (Crenshaw, 2016). In addition, Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural habitus posits that unique cultural upbringing affects the life choices and outcomes of individuals, with factors like class, race, and gender all being taken into consideration.

Can we justify our study?

Our target demographic are black women, girls and gender expansive youths ages 17-22 who consider themselves first generation and Black women and gender expansive individuals who also consider themselves first generation and would have attended colleges during the prescribed age group. The term “first generation” was first coined in 1979 by educator Fuji Adachi to describe students who do not have a parent with a bachelor’s degree (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2018). Since then, the term “first generation” has become a staple in the higher education community, with thousands of scholarships, support groups, and programs providing resources to such students.

The number of students who are first generation has overall decreased since the 1990s, due to the fact that parents with bachelor’s degrees have become considerably more common in the 21st century than they were 50 years ago (Startz, 2022). In this way, “first generation” has become in itself a marginalized identity. For the millions of first generation students who do continue to enter higher education every year, they are more likely to identify themselves with minority groups: racial .
minorities are more likely than their white peers to identify as first generation and speak a language other than English (Cabrera, 2014). With reference to intersectionality, we acknowledge how one of the most marginalized identities in higher education can be further marginalized and ignored when combining their identities with also being first generation, and how cultural background also contributes to the experience of first generation students. Black gender minorities who are first generation face a number of unique challenges that are often overlooked when simply acknowledging them as “first generation” students. It raises the question of whether or not “first generation” is an adequate term to describe the unique experiences of Black women and gender expansive individuals who also are the first in their families to attend college.

What is the significance of our study?
It is of critical importance to study this topic to ensure that university and national policy acknowledges the unique experiences of this group, rather than treating first generation students as a monolith. This can help support Black women and gender expansive individuals in a time when it is crucial to do so. The “persistence” rate, or ability to continue higher education, remains at only 14% for first generation and low income African American students three years after beginning post secondary education (Patterson 2020). Beyond even the identifier of first generation, only 25% of African American women graduate from 4 year colleges and universities (Patterson 2020). As Patterson notes, there remains a significant lack of research to identify how first generation Black college students who are also women are affected by barriers to educational achievement (Patterson 2020). Thus, there is a significant gap in two differing areas of knowledge: the motivations behind why Black women and gender expansive individuals go to college, and why they continue to persist once in these spaces. If research could identify both of these reasons, perhaps the graduation and persistence rate could increase for Black women, thus increasing their chances of higher salary attainment and the potential that their children go to college (Tamborini 2015, Bird 2020). Thus, it is of utmost importance to examine how habitus and intersectionality affect Black women who are first generation college students.

What is our research protocol and methodology?
Given that the researchers for this study are located different countries and cities in addition to the current global COVID-19 pandemic, for feasibility purposes, preliminary data for this study was be conducted wholly online using accessible software.

Selected methods were as follows:

Survey: The survey for the "Why College, Why Now" Study was performed via Qualtrics software between the dates of July 28th, 2022, and August 7th, 2022. During this time, 64 responses were collected.
Of these 64, 38 had responses which were considered "useable." "Useable" responses had the following characteristics: the participant self-identified as a Black woman or gender expansive person, was first generation, above the age of 18, and they completed all questions. In the survey, respondents were asked 25 questions. Questions 1-9 pertained to basic information such as age, nationality, ethnicity, and college. Questions 10-25 sacked a series of statements, which the respondents responded to on a scale of "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree."

**Cartography (ARCGIS/Infographics):**
Many researchers tend to only employ cognitive mapping in their methodologies which reduces the complexities of their findings and provides visual stimulation to their readers. However, the use of cartography to create an infographic map rather than a cognitive map, creates spatial connections to unearth trends that otherwise would not have been detected in addition to added visual stimulation (Roth, 2020). In intersectional research, cartography allows for the representation of all the dimensions that would be realized throughout this study in addition to making the data more accessible given technological advancements within this field. Using data gained from the survey, such as the participants’ nationality, country of residence and location of their educational institution is presented in an infographic map.

**Zine:** The findings from this study are presented in a Zine. This includes written work detailing the participants’ experiences and graphs and maps showing the data gained throughout the study. This creative presentation was designed to stimulate our readers and make the data more accessible.

**What questions do we hope to answer?**

1. How do black women, girls and gender expansive youth who consider themselves first generation college students define the term?
2. How do socio-cultural and economic factors and personal understandings of the American Dream impact the educational pursuits of black women, girls and gender expansive youths who define themselves as first generation college students?
3. What implications has the label of first generation college student had on black women, girls and gender expansive youths, and how has it affected their perception of identity?
Due to time constraints, we were unable to carry out in-depth interviews with our participants, instead solely using survey responses. Using the qualitative data gathered from the comprehensive Qualtrics survey that was shared with the public, we were able to identify several key trends regarding the experiences of first generation college students who identify as black women and gender expansive people. Our responses came from all around the world, differing from the dominant scholarship which tends to focus on either the experiences of first generation black students from the United States or who are immigrants. In total, we received responses from people who originated from 12 different countries, 11 different ethnicities, and who attend more than 19 colleges and universities.

As previously mentioned, respondents were given a series of statements that they assessed their agreement with on a scale of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The statements were intended to have the respondents think critically about several different factors regarding their college experience, with a particular focus on the motivations that pushed them to attend college in the first place. In all, we were able to identify one major finding at the conclusion of the study with subsequent data analysis.

Key Findings: Self-motivation is more prevalent in first generation college students attending college than habitus alone

Previous literature overwhelmingly asserted that familial duty and responsibility was a large component of why Black women and gender expansive peoples attended college. Griffin (2012) found that cultural habitus surrounding college had a large influence on why Black first generation students from immigrant backgrounds attended, noting that there was significant cultural value and emphasis from family on the importance of higher education. A large share of our respondents (36%) selected "strongly agree" with the statement "My family's dreams and aspirations were a large part of my college" (Figure 1). The second largest share was "slightly agree" with 27% of respondents selecting this. Only one respondent strongly disagreed with this statement. When asked their agreement with the statement "I was frequently told growing up by members of my family to pursue a college degree" 50% of respondents said that they "strongly agreed" with this statement (Figure 2). Evidently, Griffin is right—habitus that emphasizes education is a large factor in encouraging individuals who do not have parents who have attended college to do so.

However, not only does our research demonstrate that a cultural habitus that emphasizes the importance of higher education is prominent across the broader diaspora, not simply in immigrant households, it also demonstrates that cultural habitus alone is not enough to
push Black women who are first generation college students into education alone. It would seem that self-motivation is also a large factor that pushes Black women and gender expansive peoples into the realms of higher education, perhaps to a greater extant than cultural habitus alone.

For example, when asked the statement "My own personal goals and aspirations were a large part of my decision to attend college" an astonishing 72% of respondents put that they "strongly agreed" with this statement, with no respondents saying that they "strongly disagreed" with this statement and only two respondents saying that they "somewhat disagreed" or "disagreed" with the statement.

In addition, though Griffin also suggests that career paths and perceived prestige are also influenced by family (though notes that this often does not meet expectations due to financial constraints), it would seem that students are largely independent in regards to their own academic path. When given the prompt "I selected my major because of what my family might think of me" 55% of respondents selected an answer in the "disagree" category, with 22% of respondents selecting "strongly disagree." However, the majority of respondents selected "strongly agree" when asked if they selected their major for a "practical" purpose, suggesting that familial approval might not be as important as personal goals and success.

Lastly, when prompted with the statement "My family assisted me with the college admissions process (filling out forms, completing financial aid, etc.) 55% of respondents selected "disagree" options, with only 11% selecting "strongly agree" (Figure 2). This aligns with research done by Callan (2018) who notes that first generation students often struggle with familial support when navigating aspects of college. However, it demonstrates the independence and tenacity required by such students to complete this task.

In all, these findings show that self-motivation, when push comes to shove, is a greater motivator in the reasons for why first generation college students who identify as Black gender minorities are in college, and their reasonings for their own academic path. Habitus and encouragement from family, however, may have a role in placing cultural value on college that may not otherwise be present. Furthermore, these findings also show a key characteristic of resilience that has often been noted amongst first generation students who identify as Black women. Callan (2018) notes that one of the defining characteristics in her study of Black first generation students at a university in Florida was resilience: the ability to persevere through any problem or dilemma by oneself. Using Crenshaw's framework of intersectionality, it is easy to see how the identity of being a Black woman, an identifier which has historically been a self-advocate due to dual oppression through both race and
gender, would become a factor that is further compounded through the challenges of being a first generation student. Once again, though previous studies often place familial and cultural expectations at the forefront of why first generation students are able to succeed in college, perhaps for Black gender minorities, it is the cultural expectation of resilience that also allows them to persevere even in times of great struggle.

**What do we conclude?**

Applying intersectional research practices to black girl centered studies has proven immensely beneficial in contextualizing the multi-layered identities that have been created in post colonial societies. There are too many times when black women are asked to "pick a struggle" with the belief that one social experience does not create a cluster of secondary experiences that must be overcome.

Demarginalizing the intersections between racism, classism, sexism, multiculturalism and associated concepts that apply to the identities of black women, girls and gender expansive youths who consider themselves first generation, we were able to conclude that familial obligations and expectations coupled with self motivation are factors that shape their decision to pursue higher education.

Ultimately, our research shows that first gen Black women and gender expansive people are largely independent when it comes to the outcomes of their academic choices while in college, as well as their motivations for applying in the first place. Our research contradicts from previous literature to assert that the onus of motivation should not be placed on the family, but rather, the students themselves.

**What are our proposals for future analysis?**

We propose for interviews to be conducted to further document the experiences of the cohort and determine how their intersectionality allow them to define the term first generation.

We also propose assessing if marked data on the standard of living in the home countries of participants who immigrated has any correlation to their the attainment of a degree, how many return to their home countries upon completion of their studies?
Figure 1. Graph depicting respondents' answer to the prompt "My family's dreams were a large part of my decision to attend college"

Figure 2. Graph depicting respondents' answer to the prompt "I was frequently told growing up by members of my family to pursue a college degree"
Figure 3. Graph depicting respondents' answer to the prompt "My family assisted me with my college admissions process (filling out forms, completing financial aid, etc.)."

Figure 3: Map depicting the self-identified "hometowns" of the participants in our study.
References


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