EXAMINING DISPROPORTIONALITIES IN SUCCESS RATES FOR AN ONLINE GRADUATE SCHOOL TEACHER PREPARATION PROGRAM

by
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A dissertation submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

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Abstract

Enrollments for graduate school have continued to grow in the past 10 years, with over 3 million students enrolling in postbaccalaureate programming annually. Graduate school enrollment diversity has also increased, with the Black student population increasing from 13% to 14% and Hispanic student enrollment increasing from 7% to 12%. At the same time, White completion rates for graduate school have decreased from 69.5% to 51.8%, and Black student completion rates have increased from 5.9% to 9.8%. The increase in diversity and completion rates are encouraging; however, they remain low for minority students, especially compared to their White student counterparts. This study attempted to frame for teacher educators the issues Black female students in graduate school teacher preparation to fill a gap in the literature.

Keywords: teacher autonomy, teacher empowerment, Title I, equity, teacher identity, working conditions, action research, school leadership

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# Doctor of Education Program

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Acknowledgments

The work of this dissertation was 20 years in the making. Beginning my career at the historic Frederick Douglass High School in Baltimore, Maryland, was the start to my seeing the beauty, strength, and brilliance of Black women. I could never articulate enough my thanks to the women who stood by me, brought me up, and gave me a home in that school: Elaine White-Spencer, Burnette Williams, my original teaching mentor Dr. Camika Royal, and so many more. A White, culture-shocked recent college graduate reached out to them, and they answered the call every time to build me. They are foundational in my work.

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would be great, but I also knew she would not allow the finished work to be less than excellent. I’m so grateful for her high bar of excellence and support.

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Dedication

To the women who build us, hold us, and let us go knowing we will fly.
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Chapter 1

Experiences of Black Female Candidates in an Online Graduate School Teacher Development Program

Enrollments for graduate school have continued to grow in the past 10 years with over three million students enrolling in postbaccalaureate programming annually (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2022a). Graduate school enrollment diversity has also increased, with the Black student population increasing from 13% to 14% and Hispanic student enrollment increasing from 7% to 12%. At the same time, White completion rates for graduate school have decreased from 69.5% to 51.8%, and Black student completion rates have increased from 5.9% to 9.8% (American Council on Education [ACE], 2016). The increase in diversity and completion rates are encouraging; however, they remain low for minority students, especially compared to their White student counterparts.

Conversely, teacher preparation program enrollments have declined nationally in traditional and alternative preparation programs (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2022). The total enrollments dropped from 690,000 to 560,000, and completion rates declined from 27.5% to 26.8% at the same time (USDOE, 2022). Although the K–12 population is 48% White and 15% Black, the teacher preparation completion rates are 68% and 6.98%, respectively (USDOE, 2022). Thus, the numbers of diverse students in teacher preparation do not reflect the need in the K–12 classroom. The rate of completion compared to the rate of enrollment is also alarming. Black students make up 9.6% of the total teacher preparation enrollments but only 6.98% of the completers. When compared to the 15% of the K–12 population who are Black, the circumstances surrounding diversity in teacher preparation are dire.

The alternative certification population enrolls a much smaller number of students than traditional programs annually (King & Yin, 2022). However, in the time between the 2010 to
2011 and 2018 to 2019 school years, the enrollment in alternative preparation programs increased, with more than 40,000 new enrollments. Despite the non-institution of higher education alternative certification sector’s growth in enrollment, it saw a decline in completion. As a result, the sector contributed fewer teachers to the workforce in 2019 than it did in 2011 (King & Yin, 2022). This finding is striking due to the sheer volume of preservice teachers who do not reach the classroom.

Minority students have never made up more than 28% of enrollment in comprehensive programs, whereas minority students have never represented less than 31% of enrollment in alternative certification programs (ACPs; King & Yin, 2022). The current completion rates of Black students in ACPs are higher than traditional teacher preparation 10% compared to 5%. Alternatively, White students complete traditional teacher preparation programs at a higher rate than alternative preparation at 71% to 58%, respectively. Thus, although alternative preparation programs are more diverse than traditional programming and have a higher completion rate, their overall contribution to the teaching field is significantly less. This issue makes the need to investigate the reasons for completion and noncompletion in ACPs important to growing the diversity of teachers entering the classroom. Diversity in enrollment and completion are both problematic. This finding is important as K–12 schools continue to increase in diversity, and K–12 educator prep programs are not supporting candidates to succeed, complete, and join the workforce.

Alternative certification programs that align with an institution of higher education can have online options. Online learning has mixed results for diverse populations across race, gender, and age. Online learning is a unique educational experience that requires two levels of knowledge: learning to learn online and then learning new content (Morgan & Tam, 1999). This learning also includes a socioemotional element that instructors and candidates must recognize.
Specific subgroups of candidates can be successful in this unique learning environment. In addition to the disparities in program completion for the teacher preparation programs, it is unknown the extent to which online programs support successful program completion for all populations. The goal of these programs is to contribute to the teaching workforce, but variable outcomes for completion are a problem.

**Problem of Practice**

Graduate schools have become more diverse in the United States (NCES, 2022b), but teacher preparation programs are not (King & Yin, 2022). As the K–12 sector also diversifies, the need to develop and certify diverse populations of teachers is critical to meeting the needs of those students. The differences between male and female online students has been enumerated (Yoo & Huang, 2013), but the implications for minority students have not. Although some research has sought to understand the Black female perspective as teachers, there is little research on the success at which online ACPs are supporting these candidates in completing and succeeding.

In the researcher’s context, Black female candidates comprise 26% of the highly competitive, large online teacher preparation program. During their time as applicants and then enrolled students, these candidates could associate a race category for in the student information system (SIS). The selection for these students was titled “Black or African American,” and there were no further delineations in the system for the student to indicate any other identity details.

As E. Robinson (2010) wrote, the Black community in American was no longer a single monolithic, aligned entity. E. Robinson quoted the Pew Research Center’s statistic that by 2007, 37% of Blacks could no longer be thought of as one single race because of its diversity. Therefore, the researcher took the position that it would not be representative of the student population to refer to them as African American. Many students were immigrants with varying
associations to Africa, and some did not consider themselves Americans. Thus, for this project, the researcher used the term Black. The term White was used to refer to European descendants. References to other research reflected the terminology used therein.

**Positionality Statement**

The research conducted for this project is unique in that the researcher is the founding and current program director. For more than 11 years, the researcher managed the operations of the program, including hiring, advising, instruction, and curriculum. As the program grew from a single cohort of nearly 200 students to multiple cohorts of almost 1,400 students, the full-time team grew as well and thus the director became the manager of a larger team to support and develop the program and its people. When the program team reviewed completion data and found a disproportionate number of Black students represented in dismissal rates, the researcher was compelled to reflect on the program because, as a White woman who built the team, it seemed clear that race was influencing the program’s success rates. This positionality as a White woman was significant and complicated, but the position of director gave explicit power to enact change in the system. The access that the researcher had to data, students, and instructors offered an enormous opportunity to examine the roots of the discovered disproportionality. Additionally, the direct impact that the project would have made the work imperative in the researcher’s context.

**Factors Contributing to Academic Variabilities in Online Graduate Teacher Preparation Programs**

In reviewing research to uncover the elements of online learning and successful programming, relationships and personal motivations are significant to online persistence. Relationships at the program, instructor, and student level seem to carry varying degrees of importance but do play a role in success of candidates (Kuo & Belland, 2016). Motivations for
enrolling in an online program or course also seem to correlate to success (Holder et al., 2017). Although the challenges to student achievement, particularly for minoritized groups, are numerous, many factors play a role. Variables that influence the achievement of disadvantaged minority students include those that reflect community, home, school, and individual. Centering on the student, motivation and connectedness are important to the success of online students. Simultaneously, faculty beliefs in their abilities to support a diverse population, known as self-efficacy, are significant factors in student success.

**Research Problem Statement**

To fill a gap in the literature, this study attempted to frame for teacher educators the factors that drive disproportionality in student outcomes that face Black female students in graduate school teacher preparation programs.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine completion of students in a teacher preparation program and to explore students’ and instructors’ beliefs about their experiences in this program.

**Research Questions**

1. To what extent are Black female students successful in this online alternative teacher certification program?
2. How do Black female perceive their experiences in their education journey in an alternative teacher certification online program?
3. How do faculty describe the experience of teaching in an online alternative teacher certification program with a diverse population?
4. What are faculty beliefs about their ability to teach diverse populations?
Rationale

Few studies exist that examine the completion rates of teachers in online preparation programs, but even fewer review the alternative certification population in graduate school. Among the studies that do explore some of these constructs, the population sizes are small and the research nonreplicable. This study explored the disproportionality of success rates of students in an ACP. As online teaching and learning is a growing and evolving presence in higher education and the need for teachers rises each year, this project intends to contribute to those spaces through an examination of success rates and factors that influence those success rates.

The remainder of the dissertation is organized in several chapters. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature regarding the factors contributing to student persistence. In Chapter 3, a discussion on the methods, data collection, and analysis is presented. Chapter 4 explores the findings from the data collected. Finally, Chapter 5 contains a discussion of the findings and implications for research and practice.
Chapter 2
Review of the Literature

Nationally, graduate school enrollment has diversified in the past 20 years. Since 2000, the total non-White graduate student population grew from 22.8% to 39%. Black students increased enrollment from 9.5% to 13.9%, and Hispanic students grew from 5.8% to 12.3% (NCES, 2022a, 2022b). Specific graduate programs, while growing in diversity, are still not as diverse as they should be to have parity with the national population. Within traditional teacher preparation programs, 64% of students are White across all programs (USDOE, 2021). However, a significant number of those preparation programs’ student populations are more than 90% White (USDOE, 2021). Other teacher preparation programs, called ACPs, have more success recruiting and supporting a diverse teaching force: non-institution of higher education ACPs enrolled a slightly higher percentage of minoritized students than White students in 2018-19.7% (USDOE, 2021). Although ACPs recruit more diverse candidates than traditional programs, their completion rates are not contributing as many diverse teachers into the field. The ACPs have the highest percentage of minoritized students complete their programs but most students who completed non-institution of higher education ACPs were White (55%; USDOE, 2021).

In recent years, students engaged in online courses and programs have increased. Additionally, NCES (2018b) reported that students enrolled in online learning, also referred to as distance education, courses grew from 13.6% in 2013 to 18.4% in 2018. The percentage of Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Pacific Islander students rose from 43% to 46.4% at the same time (NCES, 2018a). It is well-known that online learners behave differently than those in face-to-face courses.

Online learning is a unique educational experience that requires two levels of knowledge: learning to learn online and then learning new content (Morgan & Tam, 1999). This learning also
includes a socioemotional element that instructors and candidates must recognize. Specific subgroups of candidates can be successful in this unique learning environment. In addition to the disparities in program completion for the teacher preparation programs, it is unknown the extent to which online programs support successful program completion for all populations. The goal of these programs is to contribute to the teaching workforce and variable outcomes for completion are a problem.

In the researcher’s context, highly-successful candidates who identify as female and Black informally seem to have higher disparities in completion outcome, despite their successful admission to the competitive and highly selective, nonprofit teacher recruitment organization. The outcomes of this context appear to mirror the outcomes in society and in the literature. Thus, this literature review shows whether this informal observation of the problem exists and the various factors that may impact variability in program completion. The ecological systems theory is investigated first, followed by a review of the literature related to factors contributing to online teacher preparation students’ success. Although a substantial number of studies have encompassed these relevant issues in education and online coursework, research on how to support and develop Black female candidates in teacher preparation remains sparse in the literature.

**Ecological Systems Theory**

This literature synthesis used Neal and Neal’s (2013) networked ecological systems theory (EST) to organize the myriad of identified factors impacting or contributing to academic disparities between racial subgroups. In 1994, Bronfenbrenner introduced the EST. The theory helps to understand the development of individuals within contexts and systems over time. Bronfenbrenner (1994) posited, “Human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological
human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment” (p. 1644). By focusing on realms or bands of contact, the theory unravels complex systems within an environment that influence behaviors. The systems include the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem.

**Figure 1**

*Example of Nested Model of Ecological Systems Originally Proposed by Bronfenbrenner*

As researchers employed Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model, they found that perhaps instead of nested inside of one another, the systems of a person or situation interact in a more networked way (e.g., Neal & Neal, 2013). Neal and Neal (2013) investigated and tested the networked model, wherein microsystem elements (home or family) might consistently interact with exosystem elements (parents’ jobs) instead of influencing mesosystem pieces (school). This approach provides a more nuanced interpretation of how the different elements of a person’s life can intersect. Use of either EST model supports the contextual nature or setting of academic disparities between racial subgroup factors explored within this literature synthesis (Neal &
Neal, 2013). However, the networked model addresses the social interactions that directly and indirectly connect one system to another, influencing the focal individual’s experiences (Neal & Neal, 2013). The widely varied contextual factors identified when considering the variability in program completion by race and gender highlight the need to explore those factors through ecological systems defined by arrangements of interaction versus a nested model. The following literature synthesis, organized using Neal and Neal’s (2013) networked model of EST, was used to ground the reader in an understanding of the influential factors (macrosystem) and setting (exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem) factor interactions contributing to possible variabilities in completion between various identity subgroups.

**Figure 2**

*Networked Model of Ecological Systems, Focused on Person A*

![Diagram](image)

The researcher’s context included a full-time online, asynchronous alternative teacher development and certification program at an eastern U.S. university. This program recruited and trained full-time K–12 classroom teachers across the United States. When investigating the potential factors that influenced a student in the program, many elements arose. Figure 3 outlines the potential contributing factors for the students. The student is layered with influences on behavior: institutional costs, program requirements, personal responsibilities, job responsibilities, personal identity, culture, and multiple Microsystems (e.g., family and school).

In EST, the microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face to face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment. (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 1645)

Schools are a primary example of a microsystem, and what happens there can support (or hinder) a person’s development over time. The mesosystem includes the links between two or more places (microsystems) where personal development has occurred. In the case of the teacher education programs, the students' home and school lives intersect.

When one applies Neal and Neal’s (2013) model to this researcher’s context, many factors arose. These factors included student motivation, student identity, faculty self-efficacy, and faculty training or preparedness.
When considering which elements of the student’s experience to focus for this research, the most salient factors appeared to be student motivation, student identity, connectedness, faculty abilities, and faculty self-efficacy.

This literature review focuses on the microsystems that appear to be factors for the students enrolled in this online program: student motivations and instructor beliefs. The review continues to the mesosystem influences to review the research on the interactions between the student and the program, including connectedness at the course and instructor level.

**Literature Synthesis**

This literature synthesis explores the various factors that may influence students’ persistence in an online alternative certification teacher preparation program to understand the nuances of the program success rates for Black female students. The review begins by
investigating student identity and its intersection with learning online. Next, the literature review
explores the motivation theory and connections with student choices. Connectedness for students
and instructors is reviewed next, followed by instructor factors.

**Students’ Identity and Learning**

It is well researched that Black women in graduate coursework experience school
differently due to the intersectionality of their race and gender (S. J. Robinson, 2013). The
feelings of obligation to prove their worth and uplift themselves and their race and gender
permeate their choices and actions (S. J. Robinson, 2013). The results can create added pressures
to the lives of Black women often obligated to balance responsibilities in their families and
communities (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). These feelings and pressures can manifest as competing
priorities; without a programmatic structure or a relationship at the course level, the program
fails to retain the students.

**Race and Online Learning**

Black students face everyday racism in the form of microaggressions. Microaggressions
refer to "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put-downs'"
(Pierce et al., 1977, p. 66). Rooted in the understanding that Whiteness in the United States
provides advantages, these understated (and typically unconscious) comments highlight the
internalized stereotypes by those in positions of power. These ongoing attacks hinder the
performance of persons of color by "sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients" (Sue
et al., 2007, p. 273).

Additionally, microaggressions create dilemmas for the people of color, forcing them to
consider whether to address the offense and risk being further rebuffed or perceived as
aggressive. Although microaggressions may look differently in online spaces, they impact the
experiences of Black women. Microaggressions occur in online courses and are well researched
in online social media or blog postings. Wolchover (2012) linked hostile online behavior to
distance from the person to whom the comments are directed and the ease of committing acts of
aggression in writing versus in speech. This finding is relevant to online education, in that many
assignments or interactions revolve around or include written elements, such as discussion
boards and chat features, during live class sessions.

Steele (1997) discussed the impact of stereotypes on work and engagement by anyone
about whom a negative stereotype exists. Steele noted that awareness of stereotypes is not about
the person thinking they are part of the stereotype but that others will think they are, and they
then may act on those assumptions. Some Black women may have a desire to avoid looking
weak or incapable when enrolled in courses. This instinct is from years of having to do more
than their White peers in school for the same level of achievement (Rasheem & Brunson, 2018).
Johnson-Bailey (2004) found that Black women described the need to be self-reliant and seek out
resources of their own. According to Schwartz et al. (2003), “The double dilemma of being
Black and female in America … remains a persistent burden, even in graduate school” (p. 255).
Furthering the complexity, when struggling with marginality, it is difficult to know whether race
or gender stereotyping has played a role (Turner, 2002). Many instances of scholarship include
writing about Black men, thus ignoring or devaluing the contributions of Black women (Turner,
2002). However, some research has used Black feminist thought to encourage the ability to view
Black women’s experiences as unique (Collins, 2002).

Moreover, power dynamics complicate the issue for students as faculty members have
control over their grade and potentially the candidate's research. This experience can lead a
student to feel misunderstood or undervalued and may lead to withdrawal from the course (Sue
et al., 2007). In their study on online coursework participation, Ruthotto et al. (2020)
investigated student participation and the variability by different demographics. The researchers
used data from a fully online graduate school program, amounting to 1,914 participants. Participation constituted one important predictor of student outcomes. In relation to this researcher’s context, the connection of demographics to participation was notable due to the influence that participation had with learning and completion. There might have been a link between the participation of the students in this researcher’s program and their completion of the program. If candidates in this researcher’s program were consistently made to feel inferior or struggle with feeling valued, they could have engaged less to avoid painful feelings. If they continuously disengaged, their performance might have suffered and led to lower GPAs and potentially dismissal.

**Gender and Online Learning**

The relationship between online student success and student demographics were investigated by Glazier et al. (2020). In a political science department at a large public Florida university, Glazier et al. used demographic data alongside student success data of over 750 students to evaluate how, if at all, the elements were related. Glazier et al. focused on the amount of online coursework as it related to online versus live courses. Significant to this researcher’s project, Glazier et al. found that male students over the age of 22 were more likely to enroll in online courses; however, they were less successful as they added more online courses than when enrolled in live courses—85.6% compared to 79.4% success rates. Contrastingly, female students over the age of 22 and who had larger online hours represented in their enrollments do better in their course work—from 73.6 to 79.9% success rates. However, the increase in success in those numbers was represented by their in-person coursework, where their online success rates were stable. The variables here, gender and age, were notable; they highlighted the influence of demographics that related to success. Glazier et al. did not account for ethnicity or race, thus
missing the chance to layer yet another demographic potentially related to the success of the students.

**Motivation Theory**

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are well-known distinctions in perspectives (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Ryan and Deci (2000) defined intrinsic motivation as “the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence” (p. 56). Ryan and Deci also stated that relatedness of feeling connected to individuals and activities, self-determination, free choice, feelings of competence, also called self-efficacy, resulted in the natural growth of intrinsic motivation. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) divided competence into two categories: teaching efficacy, personal efficacy. Dörnyei and Ushioda explained teaching efficacy as the beliefs of teachers on the possibility to foster student learning despite obstacles, such as home environment, while they express teachers’ own appraisal of personal influence on this process as personal efficacy. Dörnyei and Ushioda also associated intrinsic motivation with internal pleasure of autonomously carrying out a meaningful activity on an interesting subject matter with feelings of competence. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation contradicts intrinsic motivation as the activity is done to achieve an instrumental goal rather than inherent satisfaction (Reiss, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

**Motivation in Online Learners**

Motivation in online learning is complex but mostly impacted by individual traits and specific contexts (Hartnett, 2018). Francis et al. (2019) investigated motivations of online and face-to-face community college students. With over 2,400 participants, Francis et al. gathered data that showed online learners and face-to-face learners did not have different initial motivation for enrollment nor did they have different motivation over time. The researchers noted differences in adult learners’ performances in online courses; adult learners received lower
overall grades and higher withdrawal rates than face-to-face adult learning students. When reviewing the research in online learning, there is scant literature exploring online teacher preparation programs and motivations of students and instructors. Thus, Francis et al. focused on online learning for populations seemingly similar to the researcher’s context: adults, graduate schools, and diverse populations.

Yoo and Huang (2013) investigated the adult learning population in online learning. The authors investigated the influence of gender and age on the motivation of students in online programs. The researchers used the conceptual framework of Leach and Zepke (2011), which “considers adult learner’s motivation a contributing factor to their engagement with online learning” (Yoo & Huang, 2013, p. 154). At a college of education in the Midwest, Yoo and Huang (2013) investigated what motivational factors were relevant to online adult learners and how gender, age, and prior online experience impacted those motivational factors to engage in online learning. One-Hundred-ninety participants completed a validated survey. Although there was a range, most were women in their 20s and 30s ($n = 136, 58\%$) who had previous online experience (97.8%). The variables examined were gender, age, and technology.

Overall, Yoo and Huang (2013) found four primary motivations: intrinsic, short-term extrinsic, long-term extrinsic, and willingness to learn new technologies. Yoo and Huang also found that females had stronger intrinsic motivation than males, older students found short-term extrinsic factors to be more important than long-term, and the influence of technology was inconclusive. The findings in this study informed how adult learners, like those in the researcher’s program, chose to engage in online coursework. This study occurred in a school of education and had a diverse population of ages—notably adult learners. The research also highlighted the complexity of the conversation of motivation in online learning. However, Yoo and Huang did not focus on teacher preparation in graduate school, nor did they explore
outcomes for gender or race. Yoo and Huang also situated the problem of motivation within the learner and did not explore the institutional or systemic factors that might have influenced learners.

Xu and Jaggars (2013) investigated whether specific subgroups of students have different rates of success in online learning. Using a sample of 498,613 courses with 41,227 student enrollments from Washington State’s 34 technical or community colleges, Xu and Jaggars investigated the differences in persistence across gender, ethnicity, and age. Xu and Jaggars found that online learning had a negative relationship with course persistence compared to in-person coursework and particular groups were affected more than others. When using regression analysis, the researchers found that males were less likely to persist in course than females - .054 and - .034, respectively. Additionally, White students were more likely to persist than Black students with regression at - .043 and - .054. These results confirmed that separate demographic groups did persist at different rates. Curiously, Xu and Jaggars focused on a set of data that could be interpreted as lop-sided in that Black students made up 3% of the total population in Washington schools (as compared to 14% of the National dataset); their small population might make learning more complicated for them, regardless of the online status. This dataset was significant to the problem of practice in this current study because it confirmed the varying degrees of persistence in online coursework across subgroups. However, its population comprised undergraduate students in all majors over a large state with many varying environments (e.g., rural, urban). Graduate school teacher preparation was a specific study area and had several assumptions built in. First, graduate school assumed success in undergraduate studies and intention to complete programming. Additionally, majoring in teacher preparation was directly aligned to a job or career, thus the students felt motivated to complete to acquire or maintain a position in the workforce.
Martin et al. (2020) investigated student’s readiness for online courses and included graduate school enrollments. Student readiness included three key facets: students’ preferences in course modality, student competence and confidence in using computer-mediated communication, and students’ ability to participate in self-directed learning (Martin et al., 2020). The researchers received 177 responses from students at both a Southeastern University and outside online programs. Martin et al. used descriptive statistics and various demographic factors to conduct ANOVA analysis. Martin et al. also conducted MANOVA to examine differences among students in their responses to their readiness survey after categorizing the demographics (e.g., gender, academic standing). Martin et al. focused on student perceptions and analyzed those by demographics to determine separate effects.

In this sample, Martin et al. (2020) included the type of online coursework: asynchronous, synchronous, or hybrid. The current research project included an asynchronous program; thus, this distinction was significant to determining factors of success. Curiously, the researchers found that non-White students valued communication more than White students and rated themselves lower on their perception of readiness. There was also a difference in course format with students in hybrid courses rating their readiness higher than either synchronous or asynchronous. Because students’ perceptions of readiness could be a proxy for motivation (i.e., self-efficacy), this study was significant to this researcher’s context. This study served as another to confirm the importance in considering demographics as preparing students for online learning. It also focused on graduate school populations, which was important to this current research project.

**Motivation in Teacher Preparation and Alternative Teacher Preparation**

Schrum et al. (2007) studied the motivations and influence of online format on teacher preparation course success. Schrum et al. used a mandatory teacher preparation course focused
on the elements of teaching. This course was meant to give undergraduate students interested in teaching information a guide for their decisions to become teachers. The researchers gathered data in four ways: pre- and post-intervention survey questions, three monthly questions on reflection, and one final extensive interview with the instructor. This qualitative study found trends in student choice in online coursework rooted in convenience or a desire to engage in independent learning. This independence continued to show in answers to questions about the strength of the online learning environment. Most students appreciated the flexible timing and classroom observations. Group work was the least successful aspect of the course. The investigation into the motivations of students in teacher preparation to select an online course was directly applicable to the issues presented in this researcher’s context. Teacher preparation is a specific study pathway; thus, understanding why someone interested in teaching value online learning can illuminate ways the current program is or is not supporting their needs or aligned to their reasons for selecting the program.

In a 2019 study, Akar investigated the motivations of ACP students. Using the FIT choice scale, 248 students at a Turkish state university where an ACP runs were evaluated. The population included males and females across three subject certification areas: mathematics, health, and sports. The students were also grouped by age to evaluate the influence of age on motivation factors: 47.5% were under 26 years of age. The highest-rated motivation for students were social utility value, followed by intrinsic career and personal utility values. Participants had high satisfaction for choosing teaching despite having experienced social dissuasion for teaching. Additionally, students older than the mean age of 26 had higher scores of self-perceptions of ability, intrinsic career value, job transferability, and work with children. The study’s findings regarding the motivations of students enrolled in ACP revealed a large variability in student motivations depending on their demographic identities. However, Akar did not indicate the
degree to which instructor relationships or interactions might have played a role in student continuance.

Hogan and Bullock (2012) compared the reasons students chose to enroll in an ACP for special education versus general education. The researchers also sought to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the ACP. Hogan and Bullock surveyed current students in an ACP and recent completers and received 643 surveys. Their findings indicated that individuals were drawn to ACPs because they were fast, inexpensive, practical and convenient while offering job placement (G. M. Johnson, 2005). These researchers also found that the shorter time for certification and lower cost were large motivators to engage in the ACP.

The research on various teacher preparation program confirmed several important concepts related to this researcher’s context. First, identities were related to course and program persistence. Specifically, minority students and female students did better when hybrid environments existed or when enrolled in both online and in-person programming. In general, minority students completed ACPs at lower rates than White students. The literature review continues by looking at identity and online learning more in depth to explore those distinct elements further.

**Connectedness**

Along with motivations for engaging in certification programming, connectedness contributes to student engagement and completion. Instructor attitudes and beliefs can contribute to an overall sense of connectedness for students. Connectedness in online programs refers to “human interactions in computer-mediated learning environments that allow individuals to participate comfortably in group communications while simultaneously forming social relationships within the group” (Zimmerman & Nimon, 2017, p. 20). Many elements can lead to a candidate feeling connected, but varied, regular, and consistent communication is cited most
frequently (Green et al., 2017). Jaggers and Xu (2016) complemented this finding: "The quality of interpersonal interaction within a course relates positively and significantly to student grades" (p. 271). Students who can persist in online courses are also those who feel connected (Green et al., 2017). Students’ feelings toward an instructor influence feelings of social connectedness (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). Connectedness and relationships are known to influence candidate success in online programming (Willging & Johnson, 2009). The relationship and connection with an instructor are influential in a candidate’s success. It is possible to teach online instructors’ skills to build relationships and community that support candidates' success (Lloyd et al., 2012).

In online programming, instructors are significant to the progress of a student. Students in online graduate school programs are successful when they feel more connected to the instructor (Willging & Johnson, 2009). Much like in face-to-face classes, these faculty must build relationships that support student growth in their content. In online courses, "social interaction between students and between the teacher and students represents a major factor in the decision to withdraw from a web-based course” (Willging & Johnson, 2009, p. 117).

The performance of the instructor must be investigated when considering the successes of different populations of students. How satisfied a student is with the communication with their instructor can be a factor in continuing in coursework (Willging & Johnson, 2009). Student-instructor interaction predicts student satisfaction (Battalio, 2007). A course is most successful when an instructor interacts with students frequently and purposefully (Battalio, 2007). Sher (2009) demonstrated that student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions influenced levels of student learning and satisfaction in online programming. In a study of online students, Sher highlighted that students valued more opportunities for meaningful connections with instructors and other students. Sher stated that this interaction increased student learning.
Furthermore, instructor interaction is critical to strong student satisfaction in the course. (Yeboah & Smith, 2016). In this connected space, understanding both sides of the relationship lead to a greater view of its complexities. Students arrive at school with layers of prior learning and experiences that influence their ability to engage and learn. These elements of connectedness indicate a need to consider how students perceive their instructors. Therefore, student interactions with instructors was considered as a possible issue in this researcher’s current context.

**Instructor and Student Connection**

Goke et al. (2021) completed surveys with demographic and continuous measures at a midwestern and eastern university using a random sampling of 600 students. The students represented various genders, undergraduates and graduates, ethnicities, and ages. Students also completed different formats of online course deliveries. The researchers addressed 30 hypotheses involving the interactions of multiple descriptors: intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy, control of learning beliefs, instructor clarity, instructor relevance, distributive and procedural justice, interactional justice, perceived immediacy, participation, and instructional dissent. Goke et al. found that when students believed they could succeed, they were more likely to perceive their instructors as immediate, where immediacy described the level of perceived psychological closeness the student felt in response to the instructor. When a student did not feel immediacy, they were more likely to avoid participating or engaging in the material. Lower participation was shown to decrease student success (Goke et al., 2021). For the students in this researcher’s context, immediacy could have related to their lack of success, thus contributing to the factors associated with student completion. Along with student motivation, their identity could contribute to their learning and success in schooling.
The most significant predictor of student satisfaction in their course experience is the interaction between learner and instructor (Kuo & Belland, 2016). Students who have higher levels of interaction with the instructor also report higher levels of learning than students who believed they had less interactions with instructors (Swan, 2001). Research has shown that communication must “have a clear purpose and facilitate content delivery” (Baran & Correia, 2009, p. 20). Baran and Correia (2009) noted that in courses with high interpersonal interactions ratings, “instructors tended to post frequently, invite student questions …. respond to student queries quickly, and solicit and incorporate student feedback” (p. 278). S. Young (2006) also articulated seven core elements for effective online teaching: adapting to student needs, using meaningful examples, motivating students to do their best, facilitating the course effectively, delivering a valuable course, communicating effectively, and showing concern for student learning.

Students who believe instructors relate the content to them are more motivated and successful (Mansson, 2016; Weber et al., 2011) and tend to have more favorable views of those instructors, rating them as more competent, trustworthy, and caring (Mansson, 2016; Schrod, 2013). Students also perceive instructors as more credible when relevant examples and exercises are used that tie the course content to students’ personal and professional goals (Schrod, 2013). Thus, instructors who have strong interactions with students will produce satisfied students who are more likely to be successful.

**Instructors**

Despite growing student diversity in the online sector and teacher preparation segment of schools, the faculty population remains largely White and male, with only 7% Black and 6% Hispanic faculty (NCES, 2022a, 2022b). Therefore, it is important to consider the experiences of these instructors and how those experiences may influence their relationships with students.
Faculty Implicit Bias and Students’ Identities

Park et al. (2022) used cleaned data from the National Longitudinal Study of Freshmen and reviewed 778 survey responses to investigate instructor bias on GPA for college students. Park et al. suggested that students who interacted more frequently with faculty were more frequently exposed racial discrimination from faculty because of race/ethnicity, thus negatively affecting college GPAs. Student-faculty interaction only had a significant positive effect on college GPAs for White students. Findings indicated that encountering racial discrimination from faculty was directly linked with lower college GPAs in STEM. Findings reflected how Black students did not reap the same benefits from student faculty interactions as their White peers due to racial discrimination. Analysis also indicated that across all racial groups those participants who identified as female had lower GPAs. In line with a critical race theory lens that stipulated that women of all races and in particular, women of color, experience multiple, interlocking forms of oppression, Park et al. suggested a structural disadvantage that women of all races experienced in school. Park et al. also highlighted the importance of understanding how different subpopulations of women experienced oppression in unique ways. This finding leads to asking whether the same kind of contact with faculty would contribute to similar outcomes for this researcher’s context.

Using the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, Lundberg et al. (2018) scrubbed the response data from 16,460 to 10,071 Latina/o students from 108 community colleges. Lundberg et al. found that faculty making themselves accessible, holding high expectations, providing prompt feedback, and discussing frequently with students yielded positive results for Latino students. When faculty held rigorous expectations for Latina/o students’ work in their courses, and when students worked hard to meet those standards and expectations, students learned more (Lundberg et al., 2018). The finding showed that faculty
relationships and perceptions of student ability influenced the learning and success of Latino students. The students in this researcher’s context might have completed the program more readily if faculty engaged with them as the faculty in this study did.

Using the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey, Kim and Lundberg (2016) investigated direct and indirect relationships among precollege characteristics, student–faculty interaction, academic self-challenge, sense of belonging, classroom engagement, and cognitive skills for college students. Kim and Lundberg used analyses that included structural equation modeling to examine the sample population of 5,169 senior students and their cognitive skill development related to faculty interactions. Kim and Lundberg found that students who interacted more frequently with their faculty members tended to have higher levels of academic self-challenge and sense of belonging than those who did not or did so less frequently. These greater levels of academic self-challenge and sense of belonging facilitated students’ classroom engagement, promoting their cognitive skills development.

Although the positive effects of student–faculty interaction can be partially explained by its contribution to other desirable institutional practices, such as classroom engagement (Cole, 2007; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Twale & Sanders, 1999), there is a direct relationship between interacting with faculty members and gaining cognitive skills development. This finding reemphasizes the need for promoting students’ interactions with faculty to maximize their growth and development during the college years. However, seeing the aforementioned research on instructor-student contact potentially leading to lower GPAs for minoritized students, the situation for online learning and persistence is complex. In this researcher’s context, therefore, addressing instructors’ motivations for being involved in online teaching might be a link to investigating their communications with students.
Instructor Motivation in Online Teaching

Knowing that relationships and communications between students and faculty are significant to student persistence, faculty motivation to teach online was an important factor to explore for the context of this current study. Even though faculty implicit bias may influence the relationships developed between faculty and students, additional factors influence faculty instructional and relational practices. Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of previous research and categorized potential motivators as student-related, instructor-related, and institutional-related factors. Student-related factors identified by Bolliger and Wasilik most often referred to an instructor’s desire to afford higher education to a student population that would not otherwise be able to attend due to other obligations. Instructor-related factors for motivation to teach online included the challenge of providing high-quality instruction using technology, while institutional-related factors referred to the value placed on online learning by the institution.

Some faculty do not feel that online course instruction is as valuable to them or students as a face-to-face format (Green et al., 2009). This perception is a barrier to teachers’ willingness to engage in learning to teach online and teaching online. Lloyd et al. (2012) stated, "Faculty and institutional perceptions of online learning of the value, legitimacy, and learning outcomes of online education has not changed significantly in the past decade" (p. 2). In a 2011 study, some faculty and chief academic officers perceive online learning as inferior to in-person learning (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Investigating the conditions that facilitate faculty involvement in online courses is essential to shift the mindsets of instructors who struggle to invest in teaching online (Ely, 1999). These conditions include dissatisfaction with the status quo, existence of knowledge and skills, availability of resources, availability of time, rewards or incentives, participation, commitment, and leadership (Ely, 1999). Top barriers for faculty to engage in learning to teach online are
increased workload, time commitment, lack of personal relationships with students, and various technological failures (Lloyd et al., 2012). Bower (2001) found that faculty members demonstrated concern about limited interactions with students, especially when they never met face-to-face. Furthermore, institutions do not always value online teaching in the same ways as face-to-face instruction. Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) found that most faculty surveyed believed they had a higher workload when teaching online. However, these institutions did not pay differently for that work. Faculty cited that better compensation, training, and mentoring would encourage them to teach online courses (Bollinger & Wasilik, 2009).

Even when a faculty member invests in teaching online, there are other barriers to their success. Often faculty are inadequately trained or unsupported in the process of becoming online educators or relationship builders outside of a traditional face-to-face classroom (Green et al., 2009). Institution leaders must demonstrate their support of faculty through resource allocation in training, course preparation and development, and technological support (Green et al., 2009). Any participation in training or experience lessens the impact of the barriers (Lloyd et al., 2012). This training is essential but will need to be diversified for faculty needs and include creating a deep sense of community for instructors, despite their distance (Lloyd et al., 2012). Wingo et al. (2017) shared that faculty valued “when institutions provided mentoring, training, support, and recognition of their success” (p. 28). Thus, it is important to consider instructor self-efficacy to understand better how an instructor can influence the success of a student.

**Instructors Self-Efficacy in Online Teaching**

An instructor’s confidence in their teaching capabilities, otherwise known as teacher efficacy, can influence a faculty member’s desire to teach online (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Efficacy “refer[s] to a personal sense of certainty in one's abilities to execute a given behavior to achieve a predetermined outcome” (Robinia & Anderson, 2010, p. 169). According
to Bandura (1977), the concept of self-efficacy is a major prerequisite before change can occur. Fundamental to adopting online instruction, faculty must believe they will be successful before adoption can occur. High levels of teaching efficacy connect to positive teaching characteristics, such as positive relationships with students, creative instructional methods with students who encounter learning challenges, persisting in helping students when they do not understand, developing warm classroom climates for positive management of the learning environment (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Alternatively, low teaching efficacy can correlate with negative beliefs about the ability to motivate students and poorer student achievement (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

Across studies, faculty have reported concerns related to their perceived ability to teach online successfully (S. Liu et al., 2007). Bandura (1977) discussed that mastery experiences can offer a sense of efficacy that can transcend behavioral tasks. Often, faculty are inadequately trained or unsupported themselves in the process of becoming online educators or relationship builders outside of a traditional face-to-face classroom (Green et al., 2009). Additionally, experience with teaching online raises online teaching efficacy levels (Robinia & Anderson, 2010). Horvitz et al. (2015) found that perception of student learning and satisfaction with online teaching impacted faculty's online teaching self-efficacy. Thus, when a faculty member has low self-efficacy and is untrained, their behaviors may influence the success of students in the program. Students in this current researcher’s study might have struggled to complete the program due to these factors.

**Conclusion**

Several factors contribute to the variability in persistence for online graduate ACPs. Research on student motivational factors and identity indicate minoritized and female students do not complete programs at the same level as their White male counterparts (Glazier et al., 2007).
2020; Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Rasheem & Brunson, 2018; Ruthotto et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2003). Additionally, factors related to instructor motivation, communication, connectedness, and self-efficacy influence persistence of students (Baran & Correia, 2009; Goke et al., 2021; Kuo & Belland, 2016; Mansson, 2016; Schrodt, 2013; Swan, 2001; Weber et al., 2011; Willging & Johnson, 2009).

There exists a considerable body of research that addresses the trends and issues affecting teacher preparation. Furthermore, recent and relevant literature has focused on online learner needs, especially with the addition of post-COVID pandemic research. However, gaps in the literature need to be addressed, such as the potential impact of instructor bias in online graduate programming on student completion rates. This current research sought to add to the existing body of literature related to graduate school teacher preparation completion rates across race and gender. When investigating the program in this researcher’s context, student connection and instructor experiences appeared to be more significant factors of academic disparities between racial subgroups than motivations for online learning or teacher preparation program selection.
Chapter 3

Study Context

Chapter 2 explored the literature surrounding performance in online alternative teacher certification and preparation programs. As noted in the literature review, online learning success requires motivation to be successful and an understanding of what that success requires (Baturay & Yukselturk, 2015; Yoo & Huang, 2013). Successful candidates must know how success is achieved (Baturay & Yukselturk, 2015). Additionally, the intersection of different demographics can influence success (Glazier et al., 2020). Some instructors do not value online learning in the same way as in-person teaching (Journell, 2010). Making things more complicated, even for those instructors who do value online learning, faculty are inadequately trained or unsupported in the process of becoming online educators (Green et al., 2009).

Connectedness and relationships are known to influence candidate success in online programming (Willging & Johnson, 2009). However, implicit bias can hinder an instructor’s ability to create connection with diverse populations. Institutional privilege and power structures may impede the success of Black female students. Although previous research indicated that both demographics and that instructors’ beliefs of their abilities influenced student success, very few research projects have investigated those elements in an online teacher preparation program (Park et al., 2022; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). The author sought to fill the research void by investigating the influence of race and gender as well as instructor self-efficacy on the success of candidates in an online alternative teacher certification program.

Context of Study

The online teacher preparation program began in 2013 with its first cohort of full-time teachers in an urban school district. After many years of being a traditional Master of Arts in Teaching in-person program, the teacher preparation program shifted online in 2013 to
acknowledge the coming trend of increased online learning. The first online cohort was fully online and asynchronous, with 100 enrolled students from the local city population. As the institution sought to scale the online program, the teacher preparation work expanded to nearly 1,200 students across the United States within 3 school years. The expansion diversified the student population, and the researcher observed the difference in completion rates among minoritized students. From professional observations, more Black female students were in conversations related to dismissals than their White counterparts. Thus, the completion rates for this program and even the rates of success for those who remained enrolled showed a disparate experience for Black female students.

In preparing to engage and present this research project, it is important to call attention to the positionality of the researcher. Social location refers to the groups people belong to because of their places or positions in history and society. All people have a social location or positionality defined by their genders, races, social classes, ages, abilities, religions, sexual orientations, and geographic locations. Each group membership confers a certain set of social roles and rules, power, and privilege (or lack of).

The researcher is a cis-gendered middle-class White woman raised in a predominantly White suburb outside a major metropolitan city. As an administrator for the largest online program at the institution, the researcher has access to vast amounts of data and institutional information on student progress and patterns. Furthermore, as the founding member of the team that facilitates the online program, the researcher confers power in student and faculty spaces.

The significance of the researcher’s positionality related to the experience of students and instructors. Milner (2007) explored the dangers of ignoring positionality as a researcher and emphasized that researchers’ multiple and varied positions, roles, and identities were intricately and inextricably embedded in the process and outcomes of education research. Milner asserted
that for a researcher to work through addressing their position in an inquiry, they must start by critiquing current situations to change them. As the original lead for this program, the researcher has been part of most, if not all, conversations about dismissals for students. When most conversations were with or about Black women, the researcher had the option to ignore or rationalize the trend: The students could have been unprepared for graduate school or not qualified. However, if a person in this position of power can look at their own actions and challenge the processes and policies of the program, there is an opportunity for growth for all. This researcher intended to listen closely to the voices of Black women to learn how to improve this program.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to determine whether and how student and faculty experiences and beliefs influenced Black female student success in the online graduate teacher preparation program. The Black female population was 29% of the total population for the program. Limited research on online teacher preparation existed; when it did, it focused on traditional programs or comparing online learning to face-to-face courses and had minimal race-related variables. When research was missing for a population that was almost a full-third of the general population, there seemed little for the program team or instructors to turn to for best practices or support. Thus, this research sought to fill this gap and investigate what might be happening for students. The researcher proposed an investigation into the perceptions of relationships in the program, reviewed faculty self-efficacy, and assessed faculty beliefs in online learning.

**Research Questions**

The following questions guided the investigation of this research study:
• To what extent are Black female students successful in this online alternative teacher certification program?

• How do Black female students perceive their experiences in their education journey in an alternative teacher certification online program?

• How do faculty describe the experience of teaching in an online alternative teacher certification program with a diverse population?

• What are faculty beliefs about their ability to teach diverse populations?

Table 1

Summary Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Theoretical constructs</th>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Analysis technique</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To what extent are Black females successful in this online alternative teacher certification program?</td>
<td>Student success</td>
<td>Program data</td>
<td>Correlational statistics analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2. How do Black female students describe their experience their education journey in this alternative teacher certification online program? | Student experience: motivation 
Student experience: connectedness 
Student experience: perceptions of online alternative certification context | Focus group interviews | A priori coding |
| 3. How do faculty describe the experience of teaching in an online alternative teacher certification program with a diverse population? | Faculty experience: online diverse populations | Focus group interviews | A priori coding |
| 4. What are faculty beliefs about their ability to teach diverse populations       | Faculty self-efficacy: teaching diverse populations | Focus group interviews | A priori coding |

Research Design

In this explanatory, sequential design, the quantitative data were gathered and analyzed to inform the collection of the qualitative data. An explanatory multiple methods study design seeks to employ the elements of qualitative and quantitative research techniques, methods, or
approaches in one study (R. B. Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Quantitative data were gathered from pre-existing program reports describing graduation and dismissal data and analyzed using descriptive and correlational statistics. This initial empirical research laid the foundation for the qualitative research. The qualitative data were gathered through separate instructor and student focus groups. The data analysis occurred in three phases: the analysis of the initial quantitative data, an analysis of the follow-up qualitative data, and an analysis of the multiple methods question as to how the qualitative data help to explain the quantitative data. By using a multiple methods approach, the researcher gathered program-, instructor-, and student-level data. This research design suited this study because of the need to demonstrate trends among student data and investigate perspectives. A focus group provides an opportunity for participants to discuss and debate new ideas and perspectives and create new approaches (P. A. Young, 2018). A more structured focus group protocol established a sense of flow to the discussion.

The researcher reviewed program level data and then conducted student and instructor focus groups to operationalize the constructs for the research questions. Student success was defined by graduation rates and timeline in the program. In this study, student experience was operationalized through the focus group questions and the student status data. Connectedness was operationalized through responses to focus group questions.

As a White female researcher, the researcher was concerned that the power and privilege surrounding their work gave them blinders to what was happening for students. Furthermore, the current instructional team was predominantly White females, and the instructional community was 70% White. There was reason to believe that the experiences of these team members, regardless of intentions, missed the opportunities to better support Black women because they did not have the perspective needed.
In designing the current research project, the access to vast volumes of student data was a compelling reason to create a multiple methods approach. The raw quantitative data showed the state of the Black female experience. Employing a multiple methods approach allowed a data-backed foundation for the concerns for Black female students. Accompanying that, the researcher wanted to listen and hear stories of students to cross reference the raw numbers with student experiences.

**Population and Participants**

Given that instructor self-efficacy and student experience represented beliefs of the individuals, the instructors and students were the unit of analysis for examining the relationship between these two phenomena. An instructor was defined as any instructor assigned to teach and submitted course grades for the Fall 2023 semester. This sample included instructors from all over the country as the program was online. Further, the instructional community for this program was 99% adjunct; thus, only one full-time faculty member was invited. A student participant for this investigation was defined as a self-identified Black female who had completed at least one course in the online graduate school program. The student population totaled 100 at the time of invitation to the study. The quantitative population included all students admitted to the online graduate school alternative teacher preparation program between the years of 2014 to 2020.

**Participants**

Participants in this program were selected in two distinct groups: faculty and students. Faculty and students were invited to participate in a first come, first allowed to sign up basis. Each focus group was limited to four to six participants. Using registered email addresses, the researcher reached out to gather informed consent (Appendix E). The email lists were precreated
by the program team for ongoing support and program administration. This list was used emailing to reach out via email to the groups and distribute the research outline and consent.

**Instructor Participants**

Instructors who taught at least one section of a course in the Fall of 2023 were invited to participate in a Zoom-hosted focus group. In total, 75 instructors were emailed and invited. Of the 75, all (except one instructor) were adjunct instructors, with varying years of experience with the program. Thus, 99% of the potential participants were adjunct instructors for the program and not full-time faculty for the institution. The instructors were sent a follow-up email as a reminder to send their consent form via email, as most instructors were not local to the researcher. A total of 11 instructors sent their consent form, and 10 attended the focus groups. Table 2 displays pseudonyms, gender, race, and years of teaching in the program for each instructor participant.

**Table 2**

*Instructor Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor pseudonym</th>
<th>Years with the program</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Proctor</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Brown</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Owens</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Winter</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Watters</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Ranger</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Farmer</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Cantor</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Stark</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Crown</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Student Participants**

The student population was focused on all current continuing Black female students as the potential participant group. All self-identified Black female students who had completed at least one semester in the program were invited to participate in one of two scheduled focus groups. This population consisted of 100 students, with a goal to have a maximum of four to six
participants scheduled for each group per focus group interview protocol suggestions (see Lochmiller & Lester, 2017).

In the end, six total students responded to participate and completed consent forms; however, four were unable to attend. Two cited last-minute scheduling shifts, and one cited an upcoming certification test that they wanted to spend time studying for. The fourth did not provide an explanation. Two follow-up attempts were made to engage more students in the process, but those attempts were unsuccessful. Thus, the student focus group included two participants.

**Measures and Instrumentation**

At the instructor-level, the researcher used focus groups to investigate teaching efficacy and perceptions of teaching diverse populations. At the student-level, the focus groups were employed to understand better student experience in an online alternative teacher certification program. The empirical study employed two data sources to answer the research questions: program data and focus group interviews.

Several constructs were explored to examine students’ experiences. Students’ relationships, defined as the perceptions of students’ connectedness to different staff in the program, were examined through focus group interviews. Students of the program were invited to participate in focus groups and asked questions designed with the appreciative inquiry model. The focus group questions centered on the students’ experiences in the online ACP by asking questions about the assets and areas for improvement. The focus groups used a semistructured interview process, with questions designed using the appreciative inquiry model. Appreciative inquiry focused reflective conversations on the possible, which was a generative approach to conversations. This approach was used instead of negative seeking, which was notorious for
generating defensiveness and not solutions (e.g., Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). Table 3 shows a selected sample of questions that illuminate the student experience.

Table 3

Focus Group Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical construct</th>
<th>Interview question framed with appreciative inquiry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SE: Student motivation</td>
<td>What parts of this program motivated you to be successful? \</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What parts of your personal history motivated you to be successful? \</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What would you wish for incoming students to know about how to navigate this program to help them be successful? \</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>With whom did you create connections while in the program? \</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What elements of the program helped you connect with other students? Faculty? \</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE: Student connectedness</td>
<td>How have these connections [and/or relationships] helped you grow in your teaching career? \</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How has the program supported you in teaching students from diverse backgrounds and identity groups? \</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor experience</td>
<td>What would you wish for students to say about your influence on their teaching? \</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How have you grown as an online educator? \</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How has teaching students from diverse backgrounds contributed to your growth as an online educator? \</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection Procedures

For the quantitative data collection, the researcher accessed pre-existing reports in the student information system (SIS). This process included creating many various reports to cross-reference data and confirm population numbers. Qualitative data were collected in the form of recorded Zoom-hosted focus groups. As the population for the instructional and student community for this program were located nationally, it was important to offer the remote group conversations. Guest et al. (2017) found that two to three focus groups would result in 80% of the themes on a topic. Additionally, focus groups should last between 60 and 90 minutes to capture robust data (Joyner-Payne, 2020). Thus, the researcher scheduled two 1-hour focus group dates for instructors and students.
Quantitative Data Collection Methods

As the director of the program, the researcher accessed program data frequently for various purposes in program development and improvement. The reports had several categories related to student status beginning with application status, moving through enrollment statuses, and ongoing student statuses (e.g., graduation or dismissal). This report was generated with data derived from student demographic information input at either the application or registration stage. The student had to click categories to provide gender and racial and ethnic demographic information to input the information that generated this report. The report categories for race included the following options for selection: Null (no input), American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Unknown, and White. The null category meant that the student did not click on any option, and they left this category completely blank. There was no option for a student to say, “Prefer not to say.”

The researcher gathered these pre-existing reports from SIS at the institution that reflected data from the 2014 to 2020 school years. The report was created and exported in 19 different iterations to get the population and information correct due to the need to clarify data and check on its accuracy. These reports allowed for analyses of different subgroups, specifically race and gender for this study. The researcher created whole program reports and then separate reports on student status of Black students and of White students. These reports could only be sorted by race or ethnicity and did not offer the option to sort by gender. The student status categories for these reports were completed, current, dismissed, inactive, or withdrawn. For these reports, completed referred to graduation, current referred to students actively enrolled within three semesters of the report pull; the dismissed status was for grade-related dismissals or student-conduct dismissals, inactive was for students who had not registered in more than three
semesters, and withdrawn was for former students who actively removed themselves from the program.

The researcher then created similar reports with categories for application statuses: applied, enrolled, or graduated. These reports could be sorted by race and gender; thus, the researcher pulled reports for the whole program, including reports for White students, Black students, White female students, White male students, Black female students, and Black male students. The vast amount of information gathered encouraged the researcher to use these qualitative data instead of adding further reports. Given the sheer volume of data points collected and the reports required to get the information cleaned and useable, the researcher focused on graduation data, dismissal data, and withdrawn data for White and Black students.

Qualitative Data Collection Methods

Invitations for instructor participants were sent to all Fall 2022 instructional staff, totaling 51 potential participants. The student participant group was gathered from a student report of Black female students who had completed at least one course for a total of 100 potential student participants. The instructors were informed that they were being requested to attend one of two 1-hour-long structured focus groups. Instructor participants who sent their consent forms were sent online forms to sign up for their preferred focus group times. They were asked to ensure they had the ability to speak freely and hear other speakers during the call. The calls were recorded and transcribed by the Zoom platform. The researcher took accompanying notes and rewatched the recordings to ensure the transcriptions were accurate.

Instructor Focus Group Procedures

Once consent forms were received, each instructor was asked to sign up for either the weekend morning or evening group. Each focus group was scheduled for 1 hour via Zoom, with the researcher taking notes and recording to enable a transcription. The first focus group had six
instructors attend on a weekend morning, and the group conversation lasted 55 minutes. The weekend evening call had four attendees and lasted 62 minutes. Before beginning the protocol, the instructors were asked to introduce themselves to the group to facilitate connection among the group and give context of each instructors’ perspectives. Each focus group then moved to verbal consent to participate and be recorded. The researcher read a prepared oral consent script, shown in Appendix D, and then moved forward with the interview protocol in Appendix E. Instructors had the open opportunity to speak freely when they felt compelled to answer a question. The researcher did not speak unless answering a direct question or clarification.

In the case of the first focus group, the interview protocol questions were finished at minute 39, and the researcher felt compelled to share data from the initial quantitative analysis review to ask the instructional group to respond with their reactions. The conversation was productive and much more free-flowing than the responses to the preconstructed questions and thus, the researcher used the transcript to repeat the same information to the next focus group as well. The second focus group was also finished with their interview protocol early, and the researcher was able to share the quantitative data and ask for reactions. When there was a noticeable lapse in motivation to speak, the researcher thanked the instructors for their time and ended the call and recording.

**Student Focus Group Procedures**

The two students who attended the focus group were both second-year students still working to complete their coursework. One student, Ms. Jones, was an elementary school teacher who was at her second school in 2 years due to an unstable first school environment. The second student, Ms. Franklin, was a high school science teacher who changed careers from having been an engineer. The students both arrived on time; once they gave oral consent, they answered the scripted questions. The focus group’s total time was 82 minutes. The conversation
was successful and engaging for the two students, who had a prior relationship with one another as colleagues in the program.

**Data Analysis Plan**

All data from the program survey were exported to Microsoft Excel. Means, frequencies, and percentages were calculated for trends and to review the influence of variables on one another (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The multiple methods analysis asked the following: To what extent do the qualitative follow-up findings explain the institutional data?

To examine the qualitative data, the researcher read the transcripts and reviewed them numerous times for themes. The first coding pass began with inductive a priori coding method and sought to group comments by previous determined by the factors investigated. Three constructs were used for this analysis: connectedness, motivation, self-efficacy. These labels permitted the researcher to address trends that appeared. Along the way, codes were refined and shifted as more details about the comments were understood. Connectedness was refined to include student to student connections, student to instructor connections, and program to instructor connections. Within the codes of instructor to student connections, several themes emerged. The researcher titled these themes: getting to know the student and mentorship. For the a priori code and construct of instructor self-efficacy, the researcher found several subthemes: understanding the student experience, influence of race on their work, and reflections on pedagogical expertise. There were also additional unanticipated findings. At the student level, the influence of finances and other responsibilities presented for both participants. For instructors, discussion of program practicality and quality were recurrent themes that influenced their self-efficacy.

As the coder, the author recognized bias as they directed an online master’s program at the same school of education. As the director of the program, focus groups findings might be
altered as students and faculty could inadvertently feel pressure to participate or give specific response rates. To mitigate this, the researcher remained silent after reading questions and maintained a pleasant affect to encourage the conversation, however it was unfolding. As a cis-gendered White woman, the researcher’s perspective was influenced by lenses that might bias the interpretation of results, especially during coding. This bias was checked with copious notes during the coding process to check validity (Miles et al., 2013). In addition to researcher conversations to investigate interpretations, having a layer of intimate knowledge of programming might lead to unintentional bias in reviewing the transcriptions. To mitigate the coding’s credibility, the author took extensive notes to create a “chain of evidence” (Yin, 2015, p. 20) in a researcher’s journal. The researcher also conducted selective participant member-checking for confirmation of some interpretations (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

**Summary**

This study aimed to understand better how student and faculty perceptions and beliefs, alongside programmatic data, influenced the success of Black female students. By engaging in a multiple methods design and collecting data at the program, student, and instructor level, this study explored how these factors guided or prohibited the progress of Black female students in an online alternative teacher certification program. Data were collected using reports from the SIS and through scheduled instructor and student focus groups to answer the research questions in this chapter. Participants received emails with invitations to participate in separate focus groups. Descriptive analyses and hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used. Through these statistical analyses, the researcher hoped to illuminate further the nature of the relationship between instructor self-efficacy and Black female student experiences. Results are described in Chapter 4 and further discussed in Chapter 5.
Chapter 4

Analyses of Data

This multiple methods study sought to determine the relationship between instructor self-efficacy and student performance as well as student motivation, experience, and performance to understand the experiences of Black female candidates in an online, alternative teacher preparation graduate program. Presented in this chapter are the results from data analysis collected as described in Chapter 3. This chapter is organized into two sections. First is a description of the participants, including both instructors and students. Following that, the data analysis is presented as a response to each of the research questions.

Instructor Participants

As mentioned in the previous chapter, instructors contracted to teach a Fall 2023 course for the program were invited to participate in focus groups. In total, 75 instructors were emailed, and 11 replied and sent consent forms. In the end, 10 participated in two focus groups via Zoom. As shown in Table 4, the 10 instructors who attended were 60% female, 70% White (mirroring the total instructional staff demographics of 67% female and 67% White). Thus, although the participation size was only 13% of the population of instructors, the participants were representative of the total population by gender and race. As a result, the researcher believed that the information gathered likely reflected the group.

Table 4

Instructor Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Actual, raw data</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total attendees</td>
<td></td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total instructional population</td>
<td></td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5 outlines the instructor pseudonyms, years teaching with the program, genders, and races. Names selected for this population were intentional, as with the student pseudonyms, recognizing their roles as teachers. The program came to its current basic iteration of being an online graduate alternative certification teacher certification program in 2012, with its first national cohort in 2013. Thus, the longest time an instructor could instruct for this program was 11 years. Several instructor participants were with the program since its inception, and these instructors might have also instructed in the previous iteration of the program. Thus, the population of participants had extensive experience instructing for this program. Furthermore, as noted in Chapter 3, the total population only included one full-time faculty member, with the remaining instructional members being adjunct instructors. This full-time faculty member participated in the focus groups.

Table 5

Instructor Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor pseudonym</th>
<th>Years with the program</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Proctor</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Brown</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Owens</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Winter</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Watters</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Cantor</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Stark</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Crown</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Student Participants

As noted in Chapter 3, students who had completed at least one course identifying as Black and female per the demographic collections of the institution were invited to participate via email. A total of 100 students were emailed to participate, and six students responded to participate and complete consent forms; however, four were not able to attend, and thus two total
participants engaged in the focus groups. Of those who could not attend, two cited last-minute scheduling shifts, and one cited an upcoming certification test that they wanted to spend time studying for. The fourth did not provide an explanation. Two follow-up attempts were made to engage more students in the process, but these attempts were unsuccessful.

The two respondents who attended the focus group were both second year candidates in the alternative certification teacher preparation program. The pseudonyms of these teachers were Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin. The researcher chose these names to signify the respect that teachers were due and to maintain focus on their statuses as teachers who supported their communities.

Ms. Jones was an elementary teacher at an urban city school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The program was online, but she resided and taught in the same city as the institution. She came to the program after working as a law clerk, just shortly following her undergraduate experience. Ms. Jones attended a notoriously competitive private, predominantly White institution in the Midwest United States. She was connected to the alternative program through the nonprofit partner, a highly selective teacher recruitment program.

Ms. Franklin was a secondary science teacher, also at an urban city school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. She came to teaching after a career with the U.S. military serving as an electrical engineer working for the Department of Defense (for the United States). When given the opportunity to volunteer with children in workshops, she discovered that she enjoyed watching students grow. Ms. Franklin investigated ways to get into teaching as a career professional and found the alternative certification pathway program.
Research Questions and Statistical Analyses

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 was the following: To what extent are Black female students successful in this online alternative teacher certification program? To answer this question, institutional reports were created from the student information system (SIS). As the director of the program, the researcher accessed these data frequently for various purposes in program development and improvement. This report was generated with data derived from student input, and the reports created had several categories related to student status (enrollment, graduation, etc.). At either the application or registration stage, the student had to click categories to provide gender and racial and ethnic demographic information. Categories for race on this report included the following options for selection: Null (no input), American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Unknown, and White. The null category meant that the student did not click on any option, and they left this category completely blank. There was no option for a student to say, “Prefer not to say.”

The racial and ethnic demographic options for a student’s selection were significant to this particular research project for two reasons. First, as illuminated to a greater extent later, most of the total population of students (N = 2,888) had no race or ethnicity associated (n = 2,542). This finding meant that 88% of students in the report were unincluded in the data analyses because it they did not voluntarily click a racial or ethnic category. Second, the Black or African American option (along with the other options) represented a highly diverse group of unique populations of people, who could have called themselves Black or African American.

The reports included five student statuses: total enrolled, graduated, dismissed, withdrawn, and enrolled at least once but not graduated. For the initial report created, 2,888 students enrolled at some point between 2014 and 2020. The graduation rate was roughly 65% (n
and total dismissals were 8% \((n = 260)\). However, as the researcher began to create new reports for specific populations, interesting differences and disparities arose. The researcher created a report that showed all students that had race or ethnicity selected. This finding meant that any student who left this category blank was removed.

Figure 4 reflects these data differences between the first and second report created. The total enrolled initially was 2,888, but the total enrolled that had a race or ethnicity associated with their student information was 346, showing a drop of 88%. The lack of confirmed data for more than 2,500 students was an enormous data loss for this institution. More of the impact of this loss is discussed in the Chapter 5 data analysis.

**Figure 4**

*Student Status Report, Raw Numbers With and Without Null Category Included*

Showing the population for whom race is accounted, the data breakdown results in demonstrated in Table 6 and Figure 5. The total raw data is reflected in Table 6, with Figure 5
illustrating the percentages. The graduation rate for this population was 64%, and the dismissal rate was 8%, as similar to the original, total population.

**Table 6**

*Student Status Raw Numbers and Percent of Total*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Graduated</th>
<th>Dismissed</th>
<th>Withdrawn</th>
<th>Enrolled but not graduated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student population</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of total population</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5**

*Percent of Total Student Statuses With Null Removed*

The researcher used this starting point to divide the population into distinct, separate groups of students to continue to reflect on the research question for this project. Once the null category for race was removed from the reporting information, the researcher sorted by White and Black or African American students. Figure 6 shows the analysis of that data. Of the total population whose race was known to SIS, 56% were White, and 29% of program students were
Black or African American. These racial demographic categories were self-identified by the applicants in their applications to the institution.

**Figure 6**

*Student Race Percentage of Total*

Once the report on total population was broken into the White and Black or African American categories, the researcher analyzed the student statuses by race. Figure 7 illustrates the breakdown of numbers for White Students. The total population of White students was 221 students, with most (69%) graduating. This average graduation rate was higher than the overall program graduation rate of 64%. Furthermore, the dismissal rate for White students was 3%, much lower than the overall program dismissal rate of 8%. There were students unaccounted for in this chart as they were still enrolled; thus, the percentage did not add to 100%. These students were in two other categories unaddressed in this project.
In comparison to the White population numbers, Figure 8 illustrates the Black or African American numbers. The total population for Black or African American students was 101 or 29% of the population. The graduation rate for this group was 43%, and the dismissal rate was 15%. Both data points demonstrated that Black or African American students were less likely to graduate and more likely be dismissed than other students in the program.
Figure 8

Student Status, Black or African American Students

To view the comparison more clearly than before, Figure 9 layers the raw numbers. These numbers show the total accounted for population, the White students within it, and the Black or African American numbers.
Figure 9

Student Status Comparison, Raw Numbers Total, White, Black or African American Students

The dismissal rates for White students versus African American students revealed a large disparity. White students were 56% of the total population and 19% of the dismissed population. However, African American students were 29% of the total population but 58% of the total dismissed population. For a group that made up nearly 30% of a program, it would be unexpected that they would comprise nearly 60% of the dismissals for that same program. Additionally, although White students’ graduation rates were on par with the total program graduation rates (69% White student graduation rate and 64% total program graduation rate), only 43% of African American students graduated, indicating a significant difference. These quantitative data revealed a stark difference in the rates of graduation between White students and Black or African American students. It also reveals that Black or African American students do not experience success in the program on the same scale as others in the program.
The data could be confirmed to reflect the population that included racial categories, as the researcher gathered and used descriptive analysis to deduce experiences of Black female students. To find this information, the researcher created several overlapping reports. Black female students were found to represent 26% of the total population; however, they were only 16.7% of the total graduates, resulting in a 43% graduation rate.

**Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 was the following: How do Black female students perceive their experiences in their education journey in an alternative teacher certification online program? Transcripts of the focus group that included Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin were analyzed to answer this research question. Beginning with the a priori codes of connectedness and motivation, the researcher reviewed the conversation and grouping commentary by codes. In the second review, the researcher investigated themes presented within and outside of the codes. Connectedness, as a construct, was observed in various ways with the students in the focus group.

Both students indicated in multiple examples that strong connections with both the other students in the program and with the faculty members were important. The researcher termed these, “I’m not alone,” which referred to having a relationship with other students that supported the participant’s engagement or matriculation in the program or as a teacher. The other theme identified for connectedness was the following: “When I self-advocated, they helped me.” This theme referred to a relationship with a faculty member that allowed for stronger progress in the program. In both cases, the participants felt connecting with the others supported their progress in the program.

*I’m Not Alone*

Student-to-student connections arose organically from commentary by both focus group participants. Connectedness between students referred to a relationship with other students that
supported the participant’s engagement or matriculation in the program. The focus group participants knew one another and reported that they had a connection with each other.

Ms. Jones detailed her desire to be surrounded by students in similar situations to her circumstances. She explained that all candidates in the program were full-time teachers, which was a benefit: “I think it’d be hard to be a student in education and only some of us were teaching at the same time.” Having all the students start in a similar position supported Ms. Jones’s work in the program by easing her ability to connect with them. Thus, she felt comfortable talking to them about the situations happening in her classroom and the difficulty of balancing teaching and taking courses. She was being vulnerable and receiving advice from other peers who were also full-time teachers and full-time graduate students in this intensive program.

Ms. Franklin also commented directly on other students and the significance of the connection with them. She noted,

Just being able to collaborate with others like you know, saying other teachers, and find out what are some things that work for them. What are the things that don't? And maybe how I can incorporate some of those ideas into my own.

Here, she referred to the idea that other students in the program might be able to contribute to her classroom by showing her what they were doing in their classrooms. Ms. Franklin made a direct connection between her relationship with other students and her teaching improvements and growth. She referenced learning best practices from her peers for her classroom practices.

The essence of what Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin said was that they felt more comfortable because they did not feel alone. They knew that there were other students who were novice teachers in graduate school classes with them. This knowledge made them feel better because it encouraged them to think that other people were going through the same process of learning. If
others could do the work, they could too and use it to improve their own teaching and practices. Student-to-student connection was an important factor in students’ progress in the program.

**I Knew What I Was Getting Into and I Don’t Quit**

Connectedness was an important feature to the student experience, alongside motivation. In the context of this data analyses, motivation came to mean the how the student knew they could do the program’s work and finish. Both candidates were required to complete the coursework for teacher certification and expressed a desire to learn and grow as well as complete the coursework. Ms. Jones felt that she understood the work of a teacher:

So my mom was a substitute teacher, and I saw her go through the whole process and she eventually ended up quitting due to stress all the time everyone… I came into this, knowing my job was going to be hard.

Ms. Jones stated that she knew what she was going to experience as a teacher and that contributed to her belief that she could do the work of a teacher and her motivation to continue teaching and attending courses. This finding indicated that she had a strong intrinsic motivation to continue because she already felt she understood the challenges.

Ms. Franklin also shared her motivation for getting through the program: “I was… having issues with deadlines, and I know that's not me. I know I’m better than that.” Here, Ms. Franklin reflected on a time when she was not completing the work on time. She noted that it was not “her” to submit work late. Ms. Franklin drew motivation from her self-image that she was “better than that” to motivate herself to continue in the program. Ms. Jones joined this conversation with the following:

I really wanted to do a good job just because I know how much of my success is because of my teachers. I went to a school that was also in a city a lot of the dynamics that my
students are struggling with. I had to deal with and so, while I'm not from [this city], I understand the feeling of [being a student].

Here, Ms. Jones shared that her experience as a student was altered by her teachers. Ms. Jones’s understanding of her teachers’ influence on her success motivated her to continue teaching and working to get certified through the program. Both participants mentioned their current students as motivation. Ms. Franklin commented, “I always finish what I start, and I don’t want to abandon my students.” She is stated that if she did not complete the coursework, she would need to quit because she would not be able to attain certification, and if she quit, she would be “abandon[ing]” her students. Ms. Franklin indicated that her motivation was influenced by her belief that her students would be abandoned if she left. She seemed to imply that leaving her school would leave her students unsupported or alone in their education journey. The concept of abandonment here appears to convey a familial relationship between Ms. Franklin and her students. The intimacy she seems to have with her students may demonstrate a cultural connection she feels with them that is unique to their shared culture.

Ms. Jones made a similar but more specific comment regarding this same type of motivation that arose from her students:

I think it’s also just so much more personal. I feel a personal responsibility to my students because I kind of feel like, if I’m not gonna do it, I don’t trust that someone else is going to, to be honest.

In this quote, Ms. Jones stated she did not believe other teachers in her school community would serve her students like her. She seems to be implying that, as a Black female teacher with a similar background to her students, she has an obligation to ensure her students are successful. Thus, the feeling was not only that she needed to continue but also that if she did not, no one else would be there for her students. Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin felt a deep obligation to persevere to
be able to support their students. This link to external motivation demonstrated that it was not merely internal dedication to getting work completed but the impact of their work on others that kept the students motivated to remain in the program and complete coursework.

**Challenges**

As the students engaged in the focus groups, two significant additional findings arose. Although they did not align directly to answering a question, these findings seemed important to this research project. The two themes were finances and responsibilities. In a general sense, the pressures of financial hardship played a role in the participants’ ongoing work in the program. Furthermore, both highlighted many responsibilities they had in addition to teaching and completing coursework.

**Walking a Financial Tightrope**

In examining other themes that arose for the participants, both mentioned finances as an additional element of stress that challenged their ability to remain in the program. Both participants began the program post-COVID. Although they came from different paths to the alternative teacher pathway, they both struggled financially. Ms. Jones said,

Another part of it is finances … I was paying for everything which was extremely stressful …. When your parents are able to have a higher paying job and support you, I think that's such a huge difference. And when we're talking about generational wealth and generational education that makes such a huge difference. I went to Notre Dame, a primarily White institution. When [COVID] happened, everyone went home. My mom was homeless, I don't have anywhere to go. Yeah, no, I've got …. it's just a lot of external factors that just don't get accounted for within, like the program.

Ms. Jones described her circumstances as similar to the experience of walking a on a tightrope with no safety net. While other students are protected if they fall, she is not. She explained that
while teaching and taking courses, she had no extra support, and no one to call if she could not pay her bills. Thus, that added pressure was stressful during her program time. She then referred to her time as an undergraduate and remembers when students were sent to their “homes,” but as a child of a mother who was homeless, she had no “home” to return to. She also discussed the generational wealth other students have. Ms. Jones expressed knowing that she is financially vulnerable and must be self-reliant, unlike other students who may not need to think about their finances. The reflection indicated a potential linking of the financial stressors for her during this program: There was historical stress in her life that accompanied the ongoing financial pressure during this teaching program. So, even as she left the undergraduate experience and had a job, finances still made a strong appearance in her life and worries. This finding showed that she was conscious of how finances impacted her explicitly before the program and during her schooling.

Unknown Human Resources Protocols for Paychecks

   Both Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin expressed their frustrations with how transitioning to teaching held elements of unknowing regarding their salaries. In this particular ACP, the students participated in a summer practicum, during which they were unpaid. As two students who relied on their paychecks to ensure financial security, Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin struggled over this summer training period. As the time came to transition to their jobs, the first year was stable until they learned of their statuses as 10-month employees. In their district, a teacher must actively choose to have their paycheck spread out over 12 months. If this option was not chosen, the teacher was defaulted to being paid only 10 months. Thus, if they had not saved, they must take on a summer job. When discussing their paychecks and expectations, Ms. Franklin noted,

   I didn't know that you could be a 10-month employee in my life. It was always, you know, around 12 months. That was not the case. So our paychecks were bigger, but then I
was forced to work summer and I did summer camp. I'm not gonna say it was atrocious, but it was atrocious.

Ms. Franklin’s shock about the policies surrounding her paycheck was an indictment of the district’s explanation of the role and onboarding. She was a highly talented career-track military engineer, and she was then accepted into a highly competitive, selective alternative teaching pathway. If she had been given the information on the difference between a 10-month versus 12-month payroll distinction, she would have understood it. However, that was not made obvious while she transitioned into the teaching role.

The lack of transparency about what it meant to be a 12-month versus a 10-month employee surprised both candidates and caused both to work over the summer. Having a summer job might seem like an obvious requirement for a teacher, but it was not for these participants. The stress of a first-year teaching was relieved by a summer off to reflect, revise, and relax. For both teachers, they could not do that.

Further, Ms. Jones described that she could change her paycheck to 12 months the following school year but because her salary was not increased, but it meant she would make less per month. In reflecting on this issue, she said, “now I'm just struggling throughout the whole year. I don't know …. I regret doing it because I think that works when you are someone with a higher pay grade.” Thus, after spending a year regrouping and struggling following the transition to teaching, Ms. Jones expressed that she no longer had the same financial capacity in the following year and that was yet another added struggle. Thus, she traded one type of pressure and influence for another, instead of making it better by being paid year-round. These financial struggles caused both candidates to feel added stress while teaching and taking graduate level coursework. This stress was also related to the large amounts of both students’ responsibilities.
Multitude of Responsibilities

Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin described how their layers of responsibility made working through the coursework more difficult. Ms. Franklin dealt with health issues during her first year, causing her to have to see many doctors and she described the stress of having to tell her school about missing work for appointments: “I had to do a whole bunch on top of [alternative certification programming], [graduate coursework], and teaching responsibilities.” These additional elements added anxiety that compromised her ability to be successful. Managing a teaching career while completing graduate coursework was not easy but to layer on the ongoing struggle of both being sick and needing to find a solution to her illness, she was overwhelmed. This additional strain regarding her own health led to feeling like she was not handling her responsibilities: “It’s been a juggling act, and I've dropped so many spinning plates. You heard the analogy before? just Yes, it's been rough.” This comment illustrated that she felt she was not keeping pace with her work and life as expected. Thus, Ms. Franklin felt she was not doing enough. This feeling of “juggling” resonated for Ms. Jones as well:

Being a student, being a teacher, and then, you know, having family and friends, I wear a lot of hats throughout the day and all the different spaces that I'm in like I'm also a team lead. I'm a soccer coach. I'm a lot of things that I sometimes over extend myself. I do it all the time. Actually, it's not sometimes I always do.

Ms. Jones acknowledged her ongoing desire to put others before her, and the work and others around her caused her to overextend herself. Although Ms. Jones did not express health concerns, it was not a far assumption that constantly overextending oneself could lead to health issues in the future. The combination of finances and large amounts of responsibilities contributed to the challenges faced by both Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin to complete this program. Despite both expressing that the program was flexible due to the online nature and their
instructors were supportive, the combination of work, teaching, and living combined to create a difficult path to certification.

Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin illuminated themes that were unanticipated in the a priori coding developed by the researcher. In sharing their stories, they demonstrated that finances and large amounts of responsibilities on top of their teaching and graduate coursework were challenges in successfully moving through the program. What they did not express was how these struggles might be related to their own race or gender. Ms. Franklin went so far as to say that while she may have a unique experience as a Black female, others do, too:

Our experiences are unique to us, but it's not a one-size-fits-all everybody, whether you're African, American, female, white. Hispanic, Asian, all of us, [have different experiences]. Everybody comes from a different walk of life. I bet if you did one for [other groups], you'll have even more different data points.

Ms. Franklin implied here that, while she is unique, it does not contribute to her success any more or less than other people’s uniqueness does. She and Ms. Jones did not mention an institutional responsibility in their success; they seem to believe that they need to work hard and self-advocate to be successful. The data from the graduation rates do not support that understanding. The data from this project reveal that highly intelligent Black students graduate at a lower rate and are dismissed at a higher rate than their White peers. These two participants were both brilliant Black female students with highly accomplished backgrounds. As the population for this program is competitive, it can be assumed that all of the students in this program have similar backgrounds. If that is true, then working hard would be natural and would lead to persistence. However, the graduation and dismissal data do not show that. The quantitative data show that, regardless of their background, Black students are not permitted to persist at the same rate as their peers. Thus, there must be an institutional or systemic reason for
the disproportionality. That the students did not hold the institution responsible for their experiences in the program demonstrates a level of internalized racism on the part of the student (Speigt, 2007). The students seemed unaware that they were having a more difficult time than other students and that perhaps their racial status had some relationship with their outcomes. Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin expressed a belief that the “normal way” to be successful is to build relationships that will lead to their success. They believe this because their past interactions with people in education have showed that is the way they could persist. They are perpetuating an institutional and systemic expectation that, if a student does not engage in exact parameters, they will not and should not be successful. This notion of normal is dictated by dominant society, and thus their oppression is internal because they are operating under this mandate (Speig, 2007). If they acted outside the bounds of this normalcy, they may not be successful.

*When I Self-Advocated, They Helped Me*

In addition to student connections, the participants discussed and highlighted the importance of connection with faculty members. Connection between students and faculty referred to a relationship with a faculty member that allowed for stronger progress in the program. This research project found that connection between students and faculty referred to student relationships with faculty members that allowed for stronger progress in the program. Both participants referenced building relationships with faculty to ensure success in the program. Ms. Jones made it clear that for her time in the program, relationships were important. She even noted that she would suggest all students should build relationships with their faculty: “Get to know your professor, it's not nearly as hard when you talk to them.” Ms. Jones was referring to the idea that the program or its work was not difficult to move through if a student had a relationship with their instructors. She called attention to this aspect because she believed that relationship helped her ask for help when she needed to get extensions.
There were two reasons why this aspect was important. First, the help that Ms. Jones required allowed her to submit assignments with the confidence that she would do well and complete the coursework successfully. Secondly, the relationship built gave Ms. Jones the belief that if she needed to change a submission, she could. She seemed to imply that the relationship conferred power to her position as a student. That power gave her agency over her progress in the course and her success. Ms. Franklin also commented, “One of my professors, she encouraged me to be very realistic. She would even say, if you can't do it, do it this way instead.” Ms. Franklin stated that the instructor modified the work because the instructor knew the student had struggled with time. In this case, Ms. Franklin felt that she had agency to reach out to the instructor and that because the instructor understood what she needed, Ms. Franklin was encouraged and supported to modify the assignment to meet her needs. In this case, Ms. Franklin also noted that she did not ask for an accommodation; she described her stress related to what happened in her life and the added stress of completing coursework. It was important to her to share with the instructor that she had struggled, which resulted in the modification from the instructor.

In both instances, the participants intentionally connected with their instructors and communicated when they needed support. They both had a deep sense of self-advocacy. They each worked to build a relationship with the instructor to self-advocate. Neither of them noted whether their self-advocacy was encouraged or initiated by the instructor. This finding was important because it called attention to the idea that the advocacy might not appear for other students who were not likely to self-advocate. That instructors were not necessarily creating a space for students to advocate, but these two students were natural advocates. Either way, for both students, the support from the instructors helped them finish assignments and complete courses. Ms. Franklin explicitly connected this relationship to her success: “That means a world
to me … because if I didn't have that support system it would have been over a long time ago.”

She stated that she would have likely quit the program and likely teaching because she could not teach without the program and the certification. When Ms. Franklin reached out because of her struggles, the instructor responded with kindness and support.

Both Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin made self-advocacy a focus area of their comments. Ms. Franklin noted, “Do not procrastinate. Ask for help often and ask for help early. I'll say that last part again, ask for help, often.” Ms. Franklin made it clear that she felt her connection with faculty came from her self-advocacy, and the relationship with the faculty members made her progress in the program more likely. Ms. Jones immediately replied to Ms. Franklin’s comment, adding, “Yeah, I would say, advocate for yourself, and get to know your professor.” Both participants focused on a connection with a faculty member that allowed for advocacy, and that advocacy allowed them to succeed in the program. When this interpretation was presented to Ms. Jones for participant member-checking, she replied:

Absolutely. I also feel that whenever college was brought up growing up, it was typically done in intimidation…. That if I was struggling, it was a reflection of myself. One reason I never asked for help was because I thought it would be embarrassing and it was no surprise that the black girl was asking for help. I felt like I had to be able to succeed on my own ability and that everyone else did too. But I eventually realized that was not how it worked. The students that succeeded the most were those that had a relationship and went to office hours. … Meeting with my professor is so vital that I always put my professor’s office hours on my calendar as soon as I get the syllabus.

This confirmation and extension of her thoughts not only confirms that the students take responsibility for building relationships with instructors but also demonstrates how much they believe it is required by them and not the instructor. There is no indication that Ms. Jones expects
the instructor to initiate the or develop the relationship. This reflection, like Ms. Franklin’s before, highlights internalized racism of Ms. Jones. Figure 10 reflects the dynamic illustrated by the two participants and how they persisted in the program.

**Figure 10**

*Student Persistence Model*

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**Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 was the following: How do faculty describe the experience of teaching in an online alternative teacher certification program with a diverse population?

*Connectedness*

During the faculty focus groups, the a priori codes of connectedness and self-efficacy were prominent. As the researcher analyzed the transcripts, four themes emerged under the connectedness construct. These themes were titled: “I know what they’re going through”, mentorship, and program elements. In knowing a student’s experience, several faculty members
confirmed that they felt connected to students because they had been teachers as well and knew, firsthand, the challenges the students faced. By far, the most mentioned element in connectedness was the concept of getting to know their students as people, not just scholars. Mentorship was a common reason to build connection, with instructors feeling compelled to ensure students had someone to lean on or learn from. Finally, the instructors explained a connect and support they felt from the program team, separate from the students.

**I Believe I Know What They are Going Through**

More than half of the instructors noted that their ability to empathize deeply with candidates about their teaching experience was important in making connections. Ms. Cantor said, “I value being able to connect with students and build relationships in order to support them, having an understanding of what they are going through as novice teachers.” She knew what new teachers experience and valued being able to connect with them to help through the process of being new. This empathy for the shared experience of being a new teacher highlighted the connections that could be built with between instructors and students when an instructor’s work background was aligned to the students. However, as all of these instructors were no longer teaching, it is hard to imagine that they truly know what teaching looks like today. Ms. Proctor made an explicit comparison between what some students might perceive a faculty member to be and what she strived to do as an instructor:

You know we're not coming from this Ivory Tower experience and saying, this is what research tells us, but we can actually say, “When I was a teacher” and making the teachers feel like we've been there. We've got you. We've got each other.

Ms. Proctor called attention to some students’ understanding that faculty was disconnected from the work of teachers. Some instructors in graduate school would not know, from personal experience, what the student experienced as a teacher. She believed that this experience mattered
because the student could connect with the instructor over their shared past work. If a student connected with the instructor about experience, they could have a stronger relationship. The nature of the language in both examples showed that the instructors used their backgrounds in teaching to build bridges with students that allowed the students to feel more supported, better understood in their work. The only Black\textsuperscript{1} man to attend the focus groups, Mr. Crown made a much more specific comment regarding how race and understanding the new teacher experience was important to him:

Particularly from the lens of a Black man, I really try … to make sure that everybody gets the universal support that they need. I do know that when I see other Black males I really want to make sure that they have a formidable sense of belonging that they feel like their voice has credence, and it matters because I know what that othering feels like. I know it that loneliness feels like when you're by yourself. You don't have anybody else around that looked [like you] except the students, and it matters to me that I have to work even more intentional to give that measure of targeted or intensive equitable support that I know some of the candidates need.

Mr. Crown referred to his intentional work to accommodate students’ needs because he felt that at one point, he was alone in his work. Feeling alone in work as a teacher, he indicated, made the work feel more difficult. His clear strategic choice to not only use his background to support teachers but also his experiences as a Black man in the classroom demonstrated the deep thought that instructors gave to how their identities influenced their teaching. These identities also combined into making connections with students to know them better.

\textsuperscript{1} Term used by instructor to describe himself.
Mentorship

Mentoring was a theme in the conversation with instructors regarding connection. Early in a focus group, Mr. Crown made it clear that it was a goal of his:

I would love for my candidates to say because of [me], I felt like I could make it, I could teach, I made an impact; he was one of the many mentors I had that could help me help my students.

His dedication to making sure that his students felt supported as candidates influenced his work with students. This direct commentary on the instructor’s design to be both an instructional resource and a mentor was drawn clearly. Other instructors noted this intention, but Ms. Watters mentioned that although she did not carve out mentoring intentionally, it was happening: “I've had candidates tell me, in like reflections, that because of the way that I handled like their situation. It also cost them to understand their students better or take into consideration their student situations more seriously.” Although Ms. Watters did not tell her students to emulate her, they used the model she provided as a supportive instructor in their classrooms.

It is not always the case that instructors intend to be mentors to their students but the chance to demonstrate the behaviors of a strong educator that are transferrable to the students is apparent. Mr. Crown followed up by saying, “I'm definitely trying to model what relational intelligence looks like between me and you as the candidate in hopes that it will turn key between the candidate and their students.” This comment got several head nods from the other instructors and one audible, “I agree.” Thus, connectedness is not only knowing about a student’s academic work or getting to know them but also laying a foundation to become a mentor or someone after whom they can model their teaching.
**Getting to Know Students**

In reviewing the transcripts for connection, instructors felt getting to know their students was important to their work. Ms. Winter, who began her graduate school teaching career over 30 years ago, noted the alignment between her connection whether in person or online: “I worked with the students in person for years and years, and that's a really important thing to me. So getting to know them this way is also important.” For this instructor, regardless of the modality of learning, knowing her students was intentional. This focus on getting to know the students highlighted that she tried to connect with her students. Ms. Watters shared how her relationship with students influenced students’ enrollments, also contributing to deepening her work with them: “I feel like I value myself in my relationship building. I've always had strong relationships with my candidates, and they'll come from like seminar three to seminar four, and it's just beautiful.” This enrollment meant that the student had this instructor and then intentionally chose them for the next part of this course series. Having a relationship that spanned two semesters instead of one increased an instructor’s knowledge of a student’s progress. Mr. Stark noted this space as a place in which he felt he needed to develop more skills: “You know there's something there that as a White man I need to find myself some growth and understanding and making better connections.” Mr. Brown explained the importance of one-on-one calls at the beginning of the semester:

> It makes those connection calls important, and trying to understand what you know, who they are, what they value, what they want with their goals, and what their hopes are what their challenges are, what they're secure about and insecure about. And I think one of the things that stands out for me. Is this the whole idea of intersectionality right? Not just students of color, but also varying age groups in different regions of the country, justice.
or fairness or context, they teach and sort of understanding how various aspects of the privilege or challenge play out.

This quote revealed the multiple layers of a student’s identity that Mr. Brown could learn about during the mandatory beginning of semester calls that all instructors engaged in with students. These calls were meant to be a starting point for students and instructors to build a relationship. Using explicit conversations to build relationships was a part of the connection that instructors expressed. In general, the instructors revealed that getting to know students was a part of connectedness in the program. They also felt that offering mentorship as an instructor was a part of being connected.

**Connection With Program Team and Program Support**

These instructors not only commented on connection with the students but also commented on their relationships with the program team. An unexpected element of connection arose during the instructor focus group conversations. Although this researcher sought to find out more information about student and instructor relationships, the instructors mentioned the significance of the program team’s contact and relationship. Beginning with the basic structure of the role, Mr. Crown noted,

> I absolutely love the emails that I get the team of like you forgot to do this, and you gotta get on that … and because this is not the only institution at which I teach, it forces me to do it for the other institution that I work at. And so I absolutely can say the structures and the systems have improve my practice for sure.

Mr. Crown referred to the ongoing structures employed by the program team to ensure program quality and consistency. As an adjunct instructor, he may have competing forces on his time, and these structures were built to keep the academic community aware of program expectations and help them achieve those expectations. During a semester, the program team monitors several
elements of an instructor’s work. First is the task sheet that is created with all items that must be completed throughout the semester, with due dates. Each instructor is required to mark the items completed as their deadlines come. If an instructor is not up to date, they will receive a reminder to either complete the task or update the spreadsheet. A second element of monitoring from the program team is the review of announcement postings, wherein the program team randomly selects announcements to review to see freshness of the announcement and relevant information. Finally, the program team reviews gradebooks to monitor whether assignments are being graded in a timely fashion.

Mr. Crown called attention to his appreciation of the ongoing monitoring of his work to help him keep up with the work in the program. The program team’s focus on the reminders and role support also gave way to ongoing email and student support and thought-partnering, Ms. Owens said,

I just know in my mind that if I need to get support or answers, or to I can get it. I know who to go to, and it’s usually immediate response. So, to me that’s very comforting.

She pointed out that the program team monitored a staff email account that all team members could access. This email account made it possible to avoid delays that could occur if only one person was a support for a large population of instructors. Ms. Proctor also commented on her experience with complicated situations and the team: “I have felt collegial and professional as well as personal support from several of them, during some [situations with students], what I have been told are rather unusual circumstances.” Ms. Proctor appreciated that she was not alone when she had difficult situations with students and that she felt she could thought-partner with the program team to find a solution that aligned to expectations of the program. All three of these comments demonstrate the instructors’ beliefs that the program and team were well organized to
support them and help them do their job better. This was the intention of the program: to help their students by having instructors give more time to their students.

Another element of support the program team provided to instructors was assignment norming sessions. In these sessions, groups of same course instructors were brought together to read, individually grade a sample assessment, and then come to a consensus about their individual grades. These group meetings allowed instructors to work together to talk through assignment expectations and grading responsibilities. As it related to the curriculum, instructors noted both the content and assessments plus the assignment norming sessions as valuable. Mr. Stark commented, “I really do love our norming sessions. I can't wait for mine.” He demonstrated that instructors benefited from the group work and enjoyed the time.

**Missing Program Supports**

In a but pointed comment, two instructors connected about the lack of intentional preparation for working with students with diverse racial backgrounds. They noted that although they were favorable about the program and its support, there were not strategic conversations about race:

Mr. Crown: As a Black man, I don’t think this program has informed my pedagogical lens of how to teach students of color.

Ms. Cantor: Agree with that as a White woman; I don’t know that I’ve had targeted strategies or conversations specifically around those as an instructor.

Here, Mr. Crown and Ms. Cantor described that, although they felt the program team was supportive, as instructors, they were not asked to discuss teaching diverse populations of teachers. Thus, although the instructors felt confident that they were supported and that the program was well-organized, there remained some elements of development missing from their training. It did not seem that they were mad that they did not have this training, and they thought
it was important to support students of color. It might be a lack of awareness of their own need for information on how to support students of color in the program. It could also be that they were unsure that this program team should handle helping them have those conversations. It was difficult to discern their levels of satisfaction because they might not have an awareness that they needed it, that the program team should provide it, or that the students of color might have needed more than others.

Program Elements

In their interviews, both faculty groups cited themes related to the program curriculum and team. The first theme, program practicality, was defined as how directly applicable the program work was to the ongoing work of a new teacher. This subcode of program developed when discussing elements of organization and training. The second theme was program quality and improvements over time. Both faculty groups expressed satisfaction with how the program instructed teachers and how it has changed since its inception. Because both groups of instructors had participants who were long-standing program faculty, their perceptions on the changes were relevant and important. At the time of the research project, the university program team consisted of five full-time staff members: one director, two assistant directors, a program manager, and a program coordinator. The team also included three part-time leads to support three distinct populations of people: capstone coaches, advisors, and prospective students. The staff managed and supported 92 part-time community members including 47 adjunct faculty, 11 advisors, 31 capstone coaches, and 3 edTPA facilitators. Each of the part-time community members received weekly updates and ongoing reminders for their positions. The adjunct instructors participated in instructional norming during the semester to check grading practices. Additionally, all positions received an end of semester check that included their students’ end of semester surveys and a
summary of their performances over the semester (e.g., written feedback on their course or group announcements).

**Program Practicality**

In this online alternative teacher certification graduate program, most students were full-time teachers who were within their first few years of teaching. Thus, the curriculum was focused on in-classroom assignments and growth for the teachers. Several instructors mentioned this element as a strength, noting the curriculum comprised “applicable classroom projects that [students] do immediately.” In a strong sentiment about this benefit, Ms. Proctor stated,

I often nicknamed the program, “what the heck do I do tomorrow?” because to me, that's how pragmatic it is. And it is not burdened with buying a 15-chapter textbook that costs $250 and trying to read 80 pages a week. It is putting them in touch with reality as best as we can through this pseudo-reality.

The focus of the program on the needs of an in-classroom teacher seemed relevant and important to the instructors. Ms. Winter said, “When I'm trying to convince people to actually do the work I can say ‘this is something you can use.’” The benefit was not just in convincing students that they should complete the work to use in their classrooms but also because the students were “[building] a deeper toolbox after the semester,” as Mr. Ranger commented. Students completing the assignments could be helpful in preparing themselves for teaching soon but even more valuable, the instructors mentioned, was the feedback: “I was able to help my students and provide them actionable feedback that they can use immediately; when they receive feedback from me, they are able to use something from that and use it in their classroom.” The immediate-use elements of the curriculum and instruction for the students came up as a strength in the program for both focus groups and across populations of gender and race of the instructors.
Program Quality and Improvements Over Time

The instructional groups also mentioned their observations of the program quality and the continuous improvements over time. The instructional group shared their belief in the value of the program quality. Ms. Watters noted, “I really value the deep research elements of all the work. I think it’s amazing for them to be able to compare their experience with research.” The link between the curriculum, research, and teaching practice tied to freedom for Mr. Crown: “I think that in this program from what I've seen, they praise creativity and other programs, and I'm not really sure if it happens.” These two comments demonstrated that the faculty appreciated the curricular content. Instructors also mentioned the highly organized team and its support of their work. Mr. Crown stated, “I can say that the structure of the program absolutely has helped with my own organization.” This support of the instructors and their belief that the curriculum supports students could indicate the instructor’s belief that the program was a strong teacher preparation pathway.

Additionally, the program changed since its first cohort in 2012, and the instructors commented on that. Mr. Brown noted,

I also valued the ways in which I have seen the program shift and grow to integrate, I think, frameworks and philosophies of teaching, like I'm talking a lot more about culturally relevant pedagogy and universal design for learning, I think, than I was when I started.

Mr. Brown showed that in addition to pedagogical shifts in the curriculum, the way the program expected instructional staff to interact with students shifted:

Although it is online, more recent changes to how the expectations for how we interact with students, I would say, these benefit all students, not just students of color. But I do think it starts to break down some of the barriers that we might be in place, that you know
one was sitting in a lecture hall. It's like when I began [teaching in] this program it was a 100% [asynchronous] I don't think I ever talked to my candidates. I've seen a shift more to … be more effective as we've like, gone from like a 100% asynchronous balance towards, you know, not a 100% synchronous. But in that direction.

Mr. Brown shared his reflections on 8 years teaching in the program. He noted that when he first started, he did not need to talk to his candidates due to the purely asynchronous nature of the program design. However, as the program evolved, the curriculum and expectations created more connections between students and instructors than before. Mr. Brown believed that intentional movement to more synchronous activity benefits the students in the program than before. He seemed to imply that having the program shift to more synchronous mode made it a more effective and authentic experience for the students.

**Research Question 4: What are faculty beliefs about their ability to teach diverse populations?**

The researcher used questions targeted at the instructors’ self-efficacy in teaching diverse populations to answer this question, which asked about faculty beliefs regarding their ability to teach diverse populations. As the transcripts were reviewed and themes identified, the researcher found two themes: “Race influences the Work,” and “Instructor Self-Efficacy.” The first theme, “Race Influences the Work,” reflected the instructors’ discussion of how their or their students’ race influenced their beliefs in their teaching self-efficacy. Regarding the second theme, instructors felt they were good at their jobs because they understood, potentially personally, what the students experienced as participants in the nonprofit ACP. The instructors also noted self-efficacy in content strength in teaching teachers.
In the conversations with instructors, the conversation of empathy came up frequently. Many instructor participants had not only been teaching teachers for many years, but they had also been teachers themselves. Some instructors had been through a similar, if not identical, alternative teacher certification pathway program and could not only connect with students about novice teaching experiences but also their alternative pathway experiences. Mr. Brown said, “I currently work for [an ACP] in their program design. So I’m pretty well acquainted with the type of support that [these students] get from that program.” The instructor explained that he worked for the ACP that fed into this highly competitive master’s program. In this context, he knew all the support and information that the students received from this nonprofit. This extra context was unique to him among the instructor community and made him feel much more aware of what students encountered and how to best support them. Mr. Ranger mentioned, “I did basically the program that these students were part of many, many years ago. I guess just from having that personal experience, you know. Kind of doing [the program] myself that’s what I bring on the table.” Like the previous instructor, this comment related to the instructor’s actual participation in the ACP. He considered it an instructional strength that he had been through the experience that the students have. These particular comments highlighted the confidence these instructors felt from knowing the ACP. This knowledge gave them a stronger sense of self-efficacy in working with students in this alternative pathway program. Although the participants spent time discussing candidate experiences and backgrounds, they also shared their strong sense of pedagogical expertise. Mr. Stark stated,
My experience as a classroom teacher myself, particularly in social studies, high school Grades 9 through 12, you know I can bring in a lot of experience in terms of the pedagogy in terms of the pedagogy, the lesson planning structure…

Mr. Stark explained that, although he had to work hard on developing relationships across lines of difference (he was a White male), he was a strong pedagogical leader and knew how to support a student to grow in their Social Studies content area. His mention of this issue underscored his confidences as a teacher while contrasting his other admission of needed growth. Thus, although Mr. Stark was confident in his strong content and teaching prowess, he acknowledged his need for growth in race considerations. This admission demonstrated the layers of instructor self-efficacy: They could feel confident in one element of their expertise and have lower self-efficacy in another. The role and their self-efficacy were multifaceted.

In another example of pedagogical confidence, Ms. Winter noted, “I was flexible before it was a policy,” referencing a post-COVID era policy from the program called “compassionate flexibility.” This program was enacted to remind and encourage instructors to seek information about their candidates’ circumstances instead of marking an assignment late or missing. Ms. Winter suggested that she did not need a new policy to know what was important; she had always been flexible and supportive of other timelines for candidates who needed them. This commentary from the veteran teacher highlighted her confidence in supporting students appropriately, regardless of what was asked of her from the program team.

**Race Influences the Work**

As the participant population for this study was focused on Black female graduate students, it was assumed that race would arise in the conversations with both instructors and candidates. In the instructor focus groups, the groups were divided on whether race played an intentional role in their connections with candidates. Two White female instructors noted that
due to the online nature of the program, they were not always sure who was a person of color and who did not. Furthermore, Ms. Winter noted, “Because I don't really know who who's, but I will say African American is an expression you use, and I seem to have a lot of Caribbean American.” This comment showed that in addition to the experiences of students being racialized, their culture would layer on their identity. It was clear that Ms. Winter acknowledged that some students would have referred to themselves as Caribbean American instead of African American, which demonstrates her knowledge of the difference. However, it is not clear how Ms. Winter was given this information as she made it clear that she did not specifically ask about culture or race. This finding is interesting because, although she did not admit to knowing all the races of her students (or at least the race the student might claim as theirs), she did know their cultural alignments. This points to the participants’ commentary that they felt they must reach out to create a relationship and control what information is given to the instructor—that the instructor is not consciously or intentionally, in all cases, creating the space for a student to share. Not having a space where an identity can be shared might say to a Black woman that her race is not considered important to the instructor. Furthermore, color-blindness, or ignoring one’s race as an influence in their life or actions, is a form of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Bonilla-Silva (2006) described that, while most White people see racism as prejudice, most people of color would consider racism as systemic or institutionalized. The unknowingness on the part of the instructor is an example of this racism—the instructors do not know the race of their students and thus are not considering their behaviors and whether they are perpetuating oppression. They believe that, by not being prejudiced in action, they are still supporting and developing the students. However, this version of racism reinforces social order because it fails to highlight the social dynamics that produce racial differences in outcomes (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).
Although Mr. Ranger did not note whether they asked about a student’s race, he said it came out in the course of the content being explored: “Kind of natural to become more conscientious about just, you know, race and individuals’ identities, including that as an instructor to graduate students … I think that's just sort of an indirect thing that happens.” The phenomenon of not being intentional about knowing a student’s race or ethnicity revealed the instructors’ continuance of oppression for their students. Figure 11 shows the original conceptual framework where students are self-advocating. However, as students are not operating in a vacuum, this model reflects the influences of an instructor in students’ actions. Transactional engagement relates to merely considering the immediate or short-term needs and responsibilities of students (Koh et al., 1995). When this model is considered, the student is the only person responsible for their success and considering their needs. Made commonplace by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, to be neutral is to side with the oppressor. When an instructor does not move beyond the immediate, transactional information, they perpetuate the systemic oppression already faced by the students (Abel & Gonzalez, 2020).
In contrast, Ms. Proctor paid close attention to the race and other personal preferences shared by her students: “It is intentional on my part not just to know them by race and gender, but by other categories that they reveal or share.” She implied that knowing about students’ personal backgrounds allowed her to support them better and that she considered this information when interacting with them.

The focus group participants who paid close attention to the race of their students were both from marginalized backgrounds. In conducting participant checking, a method that allows for participants to confirm the researcher’s findings and expand their interpretation, Ms. Proctor was contacted to discuss this phenomenon (Miles et al., 2013). She confirmed the researcher’s understanding that her outreach to candidates was strategic and important. Ms. Proctor was White and drew her practice of global education and activism from her Jewish religion. Given the long history of anti-Jewish discrimination and violence, she worked to understand as much of
her students’ identities as they were open to share. As a Black man, Mr. Crown noted several times his understanding of loneliness of being Black in a teacher preparation program. He also noted his desire to ensure that students felt their identity was considered and recognized and felt it would lead to greater success for them. Both of these instructors were intentional in their desires to know student’s in more than a surface-level relationship and it seems directly related to their knowledge of what relationships look like when a part of their identity is not understood or valued. Figure 12 demonstrates how the oppressive engagement can be altered when transformational engagement is enacted. When the instructor considers the student’s background, they can remove the obligation of the student to self-advocate and lessen the burden on the student to build a relationship that would lead the student to success.

Figure 12

*Framework for Transformational Engagement*

These instructor reflections also highlight that the program had not made it an expectation of instructors to know that information or a norm of the program that an instructor
should know that part of a student’s identity and what they might do from having that information.

**Nuances of Diversity Among Black Students.** Both students and instructors mentioned that support must be personalized and not generalized to large groupings of categories or people. Ms. Franklin was careful to call attention to this issue directly: “It's not a one-size-fits-all everybody … Everybody comes from a different walk of life.” She is implying that different backgrounds of students mean that they have different needs. The reference to all people needing different support because they come from different “walk[s] of life” was highlighted by Mr. Crown, who called attention to this and gave a strong caution to the group:

> Not envisioning Black women as a monolith … individually what does this student need as a Black woman, but also as a mom, as a parent scholar, as a scholar. I think that one of the problems the delivers of these types of conversation is like once we’re finished and it was just like this works with Black women. I could just put it to them and it’ll be fine. But what does she individually need for her context to make her the best teacher she can be. I don’t, and I know we don’t have those types of conversations as much as we need to.

Here, Mr. Crown gave the researcher a strong warning that if this research did arrive to some understanding of what practices some Black women would benefit from that those might not work for all. The researcher and others had the responsibility of getting to know students, regardless of what practices were shown to work for some. This finding was significant because Mr. Crown cautioned that research to practice was not always done well. Sometimes, research was distilled too much and did not have the intended experience it should. Further, research projects may have findings that are not replicable and, thus, inapplicable to all situations.
**Self-Advocacy.** Mr. Brown extended the conversation about race and students in a reflection on student outreach. He reflected that over the 8 years of teaching in the program, he has had roughly 5 students challenge his grades—sometimes, crossing what he considered an appropriate student-instructor line to ask for a grade change. In all those cases, he noted that the students were White males. He reflected on his desire for more Black women to reach out:

I don’t think I’ve ever had a woman come to me with like that level of push [as I have from White males], and even like, in the more minor instances of like you know “Hey, can you tell me a little bit more about why I got that grade? I had an experience recently where a Black woman called me up and said, “Hey I’m just really having a hard time with these assignments. Can you sit down and give me some extra support?” And I sat down, and I said, yeah, sure we’ll go through your last assignment. And as I was going through, I realized, I had made a couple of mistakes in how I’d evaluated…and [I made that grade] adjustment with her. She wasn’t even inviting that. So that immediately I was like, am I being biased in some way that I’m not aware of in how I’m grading? How many times has someone not said something and just accepted the grade?

Mr. Brown’s commentary revealed two elements important to this project. First, upon reflection, he was unsure how many times he might have graded incorrectly, and a student did not question his rubric markup. This finding meant that students uninclined to ask questions about their progress or inquire to an instructor about their accuracy could have received lower grades. If a student did not self-advocate, they may be less successful. The second point that was significant was whether and how an instructor created a space where a student would feel that the instructor welcomed questions about their grading. Mr. Brown was a White male, so one could question whether the White male student that pushed back on their grades would feel welcome because of
their race and gender parity or if there was something else in that population or Mr. Brown’s administration of the class that invited their questioning.

**Summary**

In summary, statistical analyses were employed to answer Research Question 1, and qualitative analyses were conducted to answer Research Questions 2 to 4. Data gathered from institutional records demonstrated an overrepresentation of Black female students in dismissals and underrepresentation in graduation rates for the program. The qualitative analyses revealed that instructors considered their students and backgrounds but not to the degree that altered the students’ trajectory in the program. Students indicated strong self-advocacy was required to complete coursework successfully, but it was unclear how much of that self-advocacy was invited by instructors or was innate to the students’ working styles.
Chapter 5

Discussion of Findings

This chapter presents a summary of the study and findings. Following this summary, a discussion of the results and implications is offered. Next, limitations are discussed followed by recommendations for further research and for practice.

Purpose of Study

This study examined student experiences and faculty self-efficacy with diverse populations to understand better the experiences of Black female students in an online alternative preparation graduate program. Thus, the following questions guided this study:

1. To what extent are Black female students successful in this online alternative teacher certification program?
2. How do Black female students perceive their experiences in their education journey in an alternative teacher certification online program?
3. How do faculty describe the experience of teaching in an online alternative teacher certification program with a diverse population?
4. What are faculty beliefs about their ability to teach diverse populations?

Methodology

This study used a multiple methods research design and explored the experiences of Black female students in an online alternative preparation graduate school program. Institutional data on graduation and dismissals were utilized to answer Research Question 1. Focus groups for Black female students and current instructional faculty were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed to address Research Questions 2 to 4. The population consisted of a volunteer subgroup of current faculty and volunteers from the continuing Black female student population. The number of total focus group participants was 12.
Summary of Findings

Results from the focus groups and data analysis are presented in this section to answer Research Questions 1 through 4.

Research Question 1: To What Extent are Black Female Students Successful in This Online Alternative Teacher Certification Program?

Success was defined as graduation from the program. Institutional and program data revealed that Black female students do not graduate at the same rate as the program average. The data also showed that, when compared to their White counterparts, Black female students graduate at a lower rate. Further, while comprising less than one-third of the total population, Black female students comprise more than half of the dismissed population. These numbers demonstrated that Black female students are dismissed at a disparately higher rate; even when they remain in the program, Black female students are not graduating at the same rate as their peers.

Research Question 2: How do Black Female Students Perceive Their Experiences in Their Education Journey in an Alternative Teacher Certification Online Program?

Students from the focus groups indicated that they possessed strong motivation to complete coursework and be successful by completing the program. They managed to be successful by self-advocating and building relationships with their instructors. Even with these connections, however, the students struggled to balance their vast responsibilities. They were confronted with unexpected financial difficulties that weighed on their time and monetary resources, and the financial difficulties added stress to their lives. However, participants did not attribute any of their challenges to their identification as a Black female student.
Research Question 3: How do Faculty Describe the Experience of Teaching in an Online Alternative Teacher Certification Program With a Diverse Population?

Faculty explored themes of relationship building and understanding. The faculty felt that their ability to understand the experiences of the students gave them keen insight into how to support the students’ development. Getting to know their students was an important element of their work. However, it was clear that there was a difference in what “getting to know” the students meant: Some instructors operated with a more colorblind mentality, not intentionally seeking to know a student’s racial background. By contrast, two instructors, both from marginalized backgrounds, were very intentional about knowing their students’ backgrounds. The instructors also described a strong desire to mentor their students and that the relationships served as a starting point for that mentorship.

Research Question 4: What are Faculty Beliefs About Their Ability to Teach Diverse Populations?

The instructors shared their confidence in teaching, especially their content areas. They shared that there was a lack of conversations about supporting diverse students. They shared that, they believed they had strong capacity to engage students. This engagement was explained as outreach with students, being flexible and supportive, and getting to know the students as people. However, race and gender were not explicitly thought of for all instructors as they instructed their courses.

Discussion

This multiple methods research project investigated the experiences of Black female candidates in an online graduate school alternative teacher preparation program. In chapter 4, the results of institutional data review and focus groups for students and instructors were described. In this chapter, those findings and their impact on the current field of research are discussed. This
section will start with a conversation regarding data and move to Black female student experiences in higher education, student motivation, connectedness, and instructor elements.

**Unknown Student Success Rates**

The missing data for the entire program was a shocking discovery. That 88% of the population for this program is unaccounted for is problematic. There is no true way to evaluate progress or engagement if only 12% of the population is reflected in the data. Even with the data that are known, success is difficult to define and measure. One can question, “Is it enough to look at graduation rates versus dismissal rates?” or “What would confer confidence in a program’s ability to support a student if there is an unknown in what the program is supporting the student to do?”

This unexpected finding highlights why difficult situations for students of varying populations are allowed to persist: No one knows they are happening. Much like Crenshaw (1989) noted when first developing intersectionality as a concept, the issue cannot be addressed without a name for the issue. We do not respect or value what we do not collect and inspect. No one is ensuring that these data are collected. The reason that we do not collect these data aggressively is because we do not examine it. We look at the graduates only as a whole group. Here, not only is there a missing name, but there is also no way to investigate experiences thoroughly to create a name for the situation.

From what is known, the race categories for this report are enormous: “Black or African American” and “Asian” represent huge swaths of the American population. There is no way to extract patterns based on experience within these broad racial categories. Thus, based on professional experience in the program, the researcher assumes that the number of students included in the analysis does not accurately represent all the people of color who likely identify as Black or African American. The concept of identity is complicated; this data set showed how
important information is lost when data are not collected to reflect how participants actually self-identify. This practice of not collecting identity information aligns with Abel and Gonzalez’s (2020) meritocracy level on the social justice continuum model for institutions of higher education. The institution does not value equity and affirms that everyone, regardless of identity categories, can succeed if they work hard enough. Race and ethnicity data are not examined or explored because the status quo of meritocracy is the norm. Thus, disproportionality in student outcomes is not examined and is not valued by the larger system.

**Black Women and Experiences in Higher Education**

It is well researched that Black women in graduate coursework often experience school differently due to the intersectionality of their race and gender (S. J. Robinson, 2013). The feelings of obligation to prove their worth and uplift themselves and their race and gender permeates their choices and actions (S. J. Robinson, 2013). The results can create added pressures to the lives of African American women who are often obligated to balance responsibilities in their families and communities (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). This study deepens the understanding of pressures that Black female students feel. The findings of this research confirm that Black female students carry an enormous number of responsibilities and feel compelled to over commit. The lower graduation rates and higher dismissal rates may reflect how their overcommitment influences their outcomes. Black women may spend a lot of time committing to their communities and have less time for graduate school or may not find it to be as important as their community obligations. For some students, even with the instinct to advocate, they may not have the same amount of time because of their competing priorities.

Johnson-Bailey (2004) found that African American women described the need to be self-reliant and seek out resources of their own. Both Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin described this need almost identically: They both spoke about self-advocacy and early communication to
ensure success in the program. Ms. Franklin was emphatic and was convinced that to be successful, she needed to reach out of her own accord. Ms. Franklin stated that, without reaching out and making it her priority, instructors would not be paying attention to whether she was struggling so that they could reach out to help her. She needed to do extra work in reaching out and requesting support because. From her experience, without initiating this contact, she would not have been successful in the program. Ms. Franklin is a former career engineer and having certainty that she needed to reach out for help underscores how even successful Black women know they need to advocate on their own behalf.

E. Robinson (2010) defined the movement from a “Black monolith” in America, asserting that the Black community in America is no longer a single monolithic, aligned entity and citing the Pew Research Center’s statistic that by 2007, 37% of Blacks could no longer be thought of as one single race because of its diversity. Both group populations, instructors and students, referenced this concept as well. Mr. Crown called attention to this and gave a strong caution that it is the responsibility of the researcher and others to get to know students regardless of what practices have been shown to work for some people within a larger group. This deep reflection shows how research can sometimes give a one-size-fits-all approach. If a program or instructor takes this approach, they may believe they have done their due diligence, by acting aligned to research. This suggestion, in essence, could absolve instructors or programs of learning more because they know what “works” according to research. That absolution is problematic because it puts the ownness back on the student to advocate for which practices work best for them. The students in these cases would be required to say the actions or support from the instructor are not working. The power dynamic involved in a student-instructor relationship may not allow for that type of conversation as it could appear critical from the
perspective of the instructor. These layered issues leave the student with a burden greater than what they already brought to the program, instead of relieving them.

**Motivation**

The findings from Research Questions 2 and 4 reveal that faculty and student beliefs align to motivation research. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are well-known distinctions in perspectives (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Intrinsic motivation is defined by Ryan and Deci (2000) as “the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence” (p. 56). They also state that relatedness of feeling connected to individuals and activities, self-determination, free choice, feelings of competence, also called as self-efficacy, result in the natural growth of intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The focus group results indicate that the instructors felt confident that if a student were intrinsically motivated, they would be successful. The instructors aligned around the concept that to be successful in this program, the student needed a personal investment in being successful. This matches the research that if a student is internally motivated, they will be successful.

**Online Learners’ Motivation**

In the context of adult learning, Yoo and Huang (2013) investigated the adult learning population in online learning and used the conceptual framework of Leach and Zepke (2011) which “considers adult learner’s motivation a contributing factor to their engagement with online learning” (Yoo & Huang, 2013, p. 154). Their findings that female students have stronger intrinsic motivation than males is an interesting accompaniment to this research in that it shifts the investigation from two personal identities to one (race and gender to just gender). The present study adds to Yoo and Huang’s (2013) study by adding intersectionality as an element to consider in addressing motivation of online learners. Xu and Jaggars (2013) investigated whether specific subgroups of students have different rates of success in online learning. They found that
online learning had a negative relationship with course persistence as compared to in-person coursework and particular groups were affected more than others with White student persisting more than Black and females more than males. The current study confirms that persistence in online programming varies across genders and race. Furthermore, the current study reveals that Ms. Jones and Ms. Franklin were incredible self-advocates and that perhaps the only way a candidate can persist is by doing so. This was also confirmed in the instructor conversations where Mr. Brown reflected that he had never had a Black female student advocate and, even when he did have one ask for help, the request was for a grade change. This research contributes to the rich tapestry of online learning discussions by highlighting where the burden of advocacy or self-direction is required.

**Motivation and Race.** Martin et al. (2020) investigated student’s readiness for online courses and included graduate school enrollments and determined that one element of student readiness was the students’ ability to self-direct their learning. The current study furthers this finding by centering Ms. Jones’s and Ms. Franklin’s self-advocacy and strong communication styles as important to being successful. Martin et al. also found that non-White students valued communication more than White students which aligns with the student participants’ desire to be communicative but contrasts the instructors’ commentary on who comes to them most often for assistance or conversations about grades. Mr. Brown explicitly mentioned that he had not had Black female students come to him frequently to ask for support or help. He did note that White male students came to him to ask for grade changes but that only one Black female student had ever come to him for grade clarification.

**Motivation, Race, and Alternative Certification.** Akar (2019) investigated the motivations of ACP students and found that there is large variability in student motivations depending on their demographic identities. This finding is confirmed by the current research
study as demographic data revealed the various outcomes by gender, race. The researcher focused on one population of students as they are grouped by institutional data collection sources. However, if allowed to be more targeted instead of gathering all Black students into one monolithic group, there is little doubt that there would be more nuance than even found here.

**Motivation and Finances**

Some students are motivated to enroll in programs that are affordable in order to lessen the financial burden on their lives. This motivation to enter a program due to low costs and quick program plan was revealed by Hogan and Bullock (2012). The participants in this study reflected on finances in the focus groups as part of their personal responsibilities and burdens and thus confirms Hogan and Bullock’s (2012) findings. The current study illuminated that when transitioning to teaching from a full-time job, finances were a large concern. The participants noted misunderstandings in how teachers are paid and the financial burden of starting initial training without a paycheck. Ms. Franklin also called attention to the lack of health care between her former job and the initial training—causing her to spend money out of pocket for her ongoing health needs. Thus, program costs are a present and significant consideration for selection and continuance in a teacher preparation program.

**Instructors Doubt Online Learning**

In addition to instructors lacking context on how to build relationships, some faculty do not feel that online course instruction is as valuable to them or students as in face-to-face format (Green et al., 2009). This perception is a barrier to their willingness to engage in learning to teach online and teaching online. Although there has been some movement in the years since that study, the current research project confirms that there is still hesitancy to fully agree that online learning is as beneficial to students as face-to-face instruction. Instructors in both focus groups revealed that while online learning could be a strong instructional modality because it allows for
flexibility of engagement and access, it is also very self-directed. Thus, students are at a
disadvantage if they do not have the skills to learn online effectively and if they don’t self-
advocate which connects to the sentiments shared by both students.

Furthermore, several instructors noted that Zoom calls and one-on-one touch points were
important to their work with students and building relationships, suggesting that teaching online
requires additional work on top of course management and grading. Research shows that the top
barriers for faculty to engage in learning to teach online are increased workload, time
commitment, lack of personal relationships with students, and various technology failures (Lloyd
et al., 2012). Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) found that most faculty surveyed believed they had a
higher workload when teaching online. Thus, the instructors for this study confirmed that it took
time beyond the course instruction, which might be a deterrent for instructors to participate. Even
when they do participate, it can be extrapolated that relationship building and student support
may be deprioritized, as it does not seem required in a face-to-face setting. Therefore, online
instructors may be inadvertently unprepared and underpaid to facilitate strong online learning
environments, especially for Black female students.

In a curious finding, studies have reported faculty concerns related to their perceived
ability to teach online successfully (Liu et al., 2007). However, this population of instructors did
not indicate their worry about teaching online. There was little conversation about whether they
were best prepared to teach or support students in an online setting despite strategic questions
revolving around online teaching and learning. This issue could be a product of the 1-hour time
limit on the focus groups or the questions feeling too structured or focused. That said, it was
interesting that instructors did not assume their skills as educators might be part of the online
learning model.
**Connectedness**

Communication that is varied, regular, and consistent is cited most frequently as elements that lead to a candidate feeling connected (Green et al., 2017). Students who can persist in online courses are typically also those who feel connected (Green et al., 2017). Ms. Franklin commented about her conviction about the importance of communication, and this study confirms the importance of communication and that students believe it is necessary to engage early and often with instructors. Jaggars and Xu (2016) found, "The quality of interpersonal interaction within a course relates positively and significantly to student grades" (p. 271). Thus, what the researchers were finding is already known by our student population. This research confirms and extends this connectedness research by demonstrating that connection was important and that students with strong motivation to complete their coursework successfully actively seek to build the relationships with instructors. Instructors also noted that connecting with students to build relationships was valuable. The instructors indicated that these relationships helped the instructors support the students better.

**Instructor Contact Influences Success**

Instructors play a large role in the success of a student. For Black women, the heightened need for contact with instructors may also lead to more discrimination. Park et al. (2022) found that students who interacted more frequently with faculty were more frequently exposed racial discrimination from faculty because of race/ethnicity, which negatively affected college GPA. Student-faculty interaction had a significant positive effect on college GPA only for White students. The instructors called attention to this phenomenon in their focus groups and confirmed that White students benefit from outreach and feel emboldened to connect with instructors, especially regarding grades. Mr. Brown voiced his self-doubt around how many times he may have inadvertently graded incorrectly and how White males are much more willing than Black
females to reach out and ask to have their work re-evaluated. This revelation highlights the double-edged sword for Black women shown in this study: They believe they need to reach out to be successful, but when they reach out, they may be exposed to further prejudice. Although Mr. Brown was reflective that his whiteness may have biased his grading, prior to this encounter with a student, he does not consider the possibility of that influence. Thus, this project extends the research of Park et al. (2022) in this area. This study highlighted that instructors may not be thinking of what instructor actions encourage students to be engaged about grades and which do not.

**More Than Getting to Know You**

What is nuanced in this particular research, though, is that none of the instructors described how they offer “varied, regular, and consistent” communication other than simply “getting to know” students. There seems to be a difference between getting to know somebody as instructors described it and what is required to know someone well enough to support their academic endeavors. The difference here is related to the concept of transformational versus transactional engagement. Whereas transactional engagement tends to focus on short-term and immediate needs and interactions with students, transformational engagement requires the instructor to motivate and connect with the student (Koh et al., 1995). The students’ needs are greater than can be understood through the basic getting-to-know-you 5-minute call at the beginning of the semester. This call was added to the instructor tasks by the program to encourage relationship building. However, implying that relationship building can be accomplished through a 5-minute call inadvertently minimize or devalue the importance of the action. This is in contrast to a contact point that may be more meaningful than the required, graded 5-minute call. Perhaps if the intent were made clear and the instructors were normed on the value and purpose, they could arrive at a different contact point than a 5-minute call. Thus,
this project extends the research that connectedness does support positive outcomes for students and also highlights that there may be ways to go about that connectedness that relate to moving beyond perfunctory, surface-level relationship building.

*Program Influence*

In an earlier situation described between Ms. Franklin and her instructor, Ms. Franklin was offered flexibility and support to complete her work in a different timeline and mode than originally posed in the course. This situation begs the question for the program leadership team of how to create an environment that promotes equity. How can a large, competitive program at a major Research 1 institution help instructors feel confident in their instructional prowess and free to make decisions but also ensure equity across sections and content bands? How does a program team build up instructional capacity so that an instructor deeply internalizes how to use their pedagogical expertise to the best end for all students, especially for Black female students and other minoritized students?

Additionally, the instructors did not say that they felt proud that they build an environment where students can come to them with questions or requests for help. There were no explicit references to how “getting to know” a student helped the student know them or if that was a desire in the outreach. Further, none of the instructors articulated how they connected with students over their shared experiences. They stated that understanding the students’ perspectives and experiences made them stronger instructors but did not mention whether and how they share that with students and how it might be employed to help the students achieve success. If it were made clearer how instructors helped the students understand their own perspectives and willingness to help, it may shed light on whether it is more the responsibility of the student to self-advocate or whether the instructor must lay a foundation for advocacy to be welcomed.
While this gap in understanding may result from a flaw in the interview questions, it is a missing piece of the conversation nonetheless.

Instructor’s Power and Responsibility

Lundberg et al. (2018) found that faculty making themselves accessible, holding high expectations, providing prompt feedback, and discussing frequently with students yielded positive results for Latino students. This transparency for students of color resulted in more learning. In a different study, Kim and Lundberg (2016) found that students who interact more frequently with their faculty members tend to have higher levels of academic self-challenge and sense of belonging than those who do not or who do so less frequently. The current study confirms these points, highlighting that students crave connection and feel that they benefit from it. Ms. Franklin felt that she had agency to reach out to the instructor and that, because the instructor understood what she was needing, the instructor was encouraged and supported to modify the assignment to meet her needs. When dealing with her instructor, she did not ask for an accommodation—she just described her stress, and the instructor replied with an alternative option. Even when she had agency, Ms. Franklin did not ask for alternate arrangements, and it was not her intent to seek something outside the boundaries of the course. The student did not know that she had the option until the relationship was built and the instructor was willing to offer options for assignment completion; the instructor had the power to offer that option. Contrastingly, Mr. Brown did mention that other students did feel agency and reached out to ask for grade changes and rubric explanations. Thus, there is clearly a difference in student understandings of instructor power and the use of the power to help students.

Closing the Distance for Self-Advocacy

Additionally, the students in the focus group put the responsibility to communicate upon themselves. They suggested that they do not believe instructors’ communication alone will lead
to their success. This additional burden to initiate contact and connect frequently adds to the layers of responsibility that are already shouldered by these students. This study highlights a previously unresearched area regarding how to ensure instructors are not just getting to know students but that there may be specific actions or sentiments that a student needs to see or hear to believe they will get support required.

The student and instructor participants indicated that there seems to be a need to move beyond “getting to know you” by understanding, more fundamentally, what steps an instructor can take to lessen the burden a student feels to create connections and encourage success. The instructor seems to need support on understanding how a student sees them as a support and what actions foster that perception. Instructors mentioned mentorship and understanding but did not state what, exactly, they do to demonstrate to students their intent to provide mentorship. In fact, several noted that they felt it was a natural extension of the curriculum but not an intentionally developed culture. Even if a student felt an instructor was nice, the student would need to believe that an instructor’s niceness extends beyond that to some level of flexibility. This might begin with immediacy. Goke et al. (2021) described immediacy as the level of perceived psychological closeness a student feels in response to the instructor. When a student does not feel immediacy, they are more likely to avoid participating or engaging in the material. Lower participation has been shown to decrease student success (Goke et al., 2021). Thus, this study further confirms that immediacy leads to participation and participation is connected to student success. However, it is unclear to what extent immediacy can lay the foundation for a relationship that actually leads to success. This project also contributes to the literature by focusing on Black females as participants. Mr. Brown noted that he only had one Black female reach out, in comparison to several White males. That difference highlights the inequity in immediacy, and this project
demonstrates that, while immediacy might be necessary, it is not clear how an instructor supports the development of connection for different groups of students.

**Limitations**

Several limitations were present in this study related to data analysis, positionality, focus group parameters, and sample size. The quantitative data for this project was analyzed in such a way that may be interpreted as reinforcing a Black–White dichotomy. The researcher made a conscious choice to address these two populations, given their large percentages in the program. However, the researcher concedes that this adds another project that compares these populations and that there is danger in knowing only these two stories and assuming that they should be compared. Also, the researcher was unable to access group-specific dismissal rate data due to the reporting structures of the institution. The ability to create that data report fell outside the scope of IRB approval and thus was not completed.

As an administrator for the largest online program at the institution, the researcher is exposed to vast amounts of data and institutional information on student progress and patterns. Furthermore, as the founding member of the team that facilitates the online program, she confers power in both student and faculty spaces. The significance of the researcher’s positionality relates to both the experience of students and instructors. This position as the director may influence responses and participation.

Even with the best-written interview questions, a disconnect between the researchers’ intent and the participants’ understanding of what was expected can occur. The survey questions were done for a structured interview; however, the answers coming from instructors were seemingly rote and answered quickly and not as conversational. The researcher acknowledges that their past interactions with these groups as a director may have altered how the participants engaged. Further, the questions that were answered maybe a limitation of the focus groups. The
instructors may have been trying to answer the questions and not expanding or diverting to be compliant or supportive of the researcher, who also runs the program. The larger faculty representation was encouraging but may be enhanced by still more participants.

The sample size for student participants was small, making this much more of an interview of two rather than a focus group representative of the larger group of Black female students. As all students were also full-time teachers, recruitment proved difficult. Two participants cited last minute scheduling conflicts in their school calendar that changed their availability. Additionally, the timing of the focus groups fell during the winter break for the institution. This was posited as an advantage because it was assumed the students would have fewer responsibilities to juggle. However, it may have also served as a disadvantage because students may not have been consistently reviewing their school email accounts (where the invitations were sent), in an effort to truly get a break from graduate school work.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

These findings support new inquiry into Black female graduate students’ experiences, online instructor training, institutional data gathering, and instructor bias. If future research confirms or extends this study’s results, finds institutional data solutions, and creates models for instructor training and support, students and instructors across institutions will benefit from stronger and more equitable learning experiences. Therefore, the following recommendations for future research are offered:

1. Replicate the qualitative section of the study with more Black female graduate students. The current project recruited two Black female participants. The value of their experiences was critical for understanding the complexities of their experiences in this graduate program. To extend that learning, more interviews or focus groups would expand the understanding of Black female graduate students’ experience in the
online graduate school teacher preparation program. Further, this study was conducted during the school year and before the semester started. There is a potential loss of attention from an already busy community; thus, the researcher suggests that the timing of invitations and focus groups be sent during the semester so that students are actively checking their accounts. However, the groups themselves should be held during the summer to allow for less impact on the teacher’s schedule.

2. Create a study investigating the population of dismissed Black female or alums candidates for experiences after the program. At the institutional level, contacting dismissed students is typically unacceptable. However, the value of learning their lived experience may trump the potential complications. The researcher speculates that discussing what happened to those students who are no longer in the program will provide insight into how one completes or is dismissed.

3. Investigate course-level data of course completion segmented by an instructor. Conduct a targeted study of those instructors with high or low levels of completion and engagement. This research project confirms that the connection between instructors and students impacts student success. What is not clear is whether there are trends in success rates for different groups of instructors.

4. Develop a project that investigates what indicators are present when an instructor creates a space or environment that welcomes and allows students to engage and feel supported versus when students are self-motivated to engage this way, regardless of the instructors’ actions.

5. Conduct an intervention with instructor bias and cultural competency training to evaluate whether these training and conversations influence student success rates.
6. Use a different population or program at the same institution. Following this recommendation would also create more data to support whether this phenomenon is for teachers or across all settings for Black female students in predominantly white higher education institutions.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Findings revealed that student-to-instructor connection was significant to both students and instructors. As such, this researcher suggests that classes should be smaller to allow for instructor relationship building. The current program includes a maximum course enrollment for standard courses at 20 students. For courses with a heavy grading load (assignments graded weekly, for example), the maximum enrollment is 16. These limits are based solely on anecdotal information from the program team and instructor conversations. Additionally, the numbers are frequently questioned by the financial side of the institutional house. Investigating best practices in online course size will inform this and then support the ability of the instructors to support students.

This research project demonstrates that instructors should strive to know not only students' backgrounds but also their motivations, which is important to student success and satisfaction. An expectation that a student survey is conducted at the start of the semester and that information reviewed prior to course engagement would allow the instructor to begin their journey of support with the student. In this researcher’s context, instructors conduct a survey, but there is no expectation of purpose or use. Further, there is no bias or cultural competency training; thus, there is no guarantee that once an instructor has more information about a student, they know how to support them or whether their biases might be causing a lack of support for the student.
At the course and instructor level, a requirement that programs and instructors log communication with students and review that log would support understanding how different instructors work with students. It may also be important to include that data with success rates or rates of dismissal to search for trends between the groups. Once evaluated, programs can look for behaviors and actions that support students’ success and make these available as a toolkit for instructors to use in their work.

The nonprofit partner organization from which this program recruits is currently responsible for onboarding and transitions. As many of the responsibilities and complications for the participants arose during transition times, the program should provide feedback and collaborate to increase understanding by students. The program is not in contact with the students for all of the parts of their onboarding and thus having the organization provide evidence of the transitions and support will provide more clarity for students and the program for what is needed to truly support them.

Finally, at the institution level, there must be a plan to be accountable to data on dismissals and a process that reviews them at this researcher’s institution; there is a process called the “Candidate Improvement Plan” before a student is dismissed, but there is no schoolwide process of reviewing the dismissals across programs and student sub-groups. If an auditing system for that data is created, it could be back-mapped to the course and program-level processes and protocols. This action can also build into the previously mentioned instructor toolkit.

**Final Thoughts**

These findings revealed that Black female students in an online alternative certification teacher graduate school preparation program are disproportionately dismissed and have lower graduation rates. These connections between students and instructors are paramount to the
success of Black female teacher preparation graduate students. However, the burden of that
contact seems to rely heavily on the actions and initiation of the students. With the K–12
population requiring more teachers every year, graduate schools must prepare and support them
to graduate. Institution leaders must investigate their data to determine what information is
missing in order to best understand student experiences. It is ethically irresponsible to have such
a large unknown at an institution of higher education such as this one. Once the information is
better collected, it must be thoughtfully approached and analyzed by the staff and faculty who
support candidates. The institution can then seek to align resources with instructional
requirements. Valuing instructional communities in higher education and gathering data to
reflect on that value will give the students the education and welcoming environment they
deserve to succeed in their classrooms. This work uncovers the brave work that must be
prioritized to ensure the students across all classrooms have teachers who were supported,
developed, and nurtured so that they can do the same for their students. With the growing
diversity of higher education and the dire need for strong educators in the K-12 classroom, the
work of supporting successful completion for all candidates will be paramount moving forward.
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Appendix A

Recruitment Material

Initial Email to request participation, faculty

Good morning academic community,

I hope this email finds you thriving in these incredible times. I am reaching out with a request for participation in an upcoming study. I’m thrilled to share the rationale and details below and appreciate your consideration.

First, many of you know that our program serves and supports teachers in classrooms all across the country. This gives us a distinct responsibility to use our collective knowledge and resources in order to develop these teachers.

In reviewing GPA and graduation data for our program, my team discovered a distinct trend that minoritized students have different completion rates. This realization was a call to action for to research and investigate the root causes of the situation.

This Fall, I will conduct a research project in an effort to better understand the student and faculty experiences in our program focused on their relationship to student completion.

The project asks participants to complete one survey and engage in one of the scheduled focus groups in January.
As committed members in our community, I am hopeful you will join us for this incredible opportunity to shape our future work. In order to join us, please review the attached research outline. You will need to review, sign, and return to me by October 3.

Thank you,
Debbie

Recruitment Material: Email to request participation, students

Good morning candidates,

I hope this email finds you thriving in these incredible times. I am reaching out with a request for participation in an upcoming study. I’m thrilled to share the rationale and details below and appreciate your consideration.

First, many of you know that our program serves and supports teachers (like YOU) in classrooms all across the country. This gives our instructional community and program team a distinct responsibility to use our collective knowledge and resources in order to develop these teachers.

In reviewing GPA and graduation data for our program, my team discovered a distinct trend that minoritized students have different completion rates. This realization was a call to action for research and investigate the root causes of the situation.

This Fall, I will conduct a research project in an effort to better understand the student and faculty experiences in our program focused on their relationship to student completion.
The project asks participants to complete one survey and engage in one of the scheduled focus groups in January.

As members in student community, I am hopeful you will join us for this incredible opportunity to shape our future work. In order to join us, please review the attached research outline. You will need to review, sign, and return to me by XXX.

Thank you,

Debbie

Reminder email for participation in study, faculty

Good morning academic community: our research project launches in just two weeks – I hope you will participate to support the next phase of our program’s development.

If you are interested, please review the attached research outline then sign and send back the consent form.

Thanks, in advance, for your support.

Debbie

Reminder email for participation in study, students

Good morning students: our research project launches in just two weeks – I hope you will participate to support the next phase of our program’s development.

If you are interested, please review the attached research outline then sign and send back the consent form.

Thanks, in advance, for your support.
Focus group date sign up, faculty

Thank you for completing the research consent form – we are thrilled to have you join us for this journey! Our focus groups will take place on XXX. To participate, please sign up for the time that best fits your schedule. This link will take you to a google form to complete your sign up.

Also, please remember to complete our online faculty survey linked here.

Focus group date sign up, student

Thank you for completing the research consent form – we are thrilled to have you join us for this journey! Our focus groups will take place on XXX. To participate, please sign up for the time that best fits your schedule. This link will take you to a google form to complete your sign up.

Focus group date confirmation

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our focus group to deepen our understanding of [faculty/student] experiences in our program! This email is a confirmation of your focus group on XXX date. We will meet via zoom link here.

If you need to reschedule, please be in touch!

Debbie

Focus group “see you today” reminder

Excited to see you later today – we will be in this Zoom room from 1:30-2:30pm EST.

Thanks, again, for your participation!

[FACULTY ONLY] If you have not completed our online survey, please do so here!

Debbie
Excited to see you later today – we will be in this Zoom room from 7:30-8:30pm EST.

Thanks, again, for your participation!

Debbie

Thank you

Thank you for sitting down to talk through your experience with our program. These conversations are critical to developing a program that is thoughtful and supportive of all of our candidates and I can’t thank you enough for lending your time to the next steps of our program improvement.
Appendix B

Participant Recruitment and Data Collection Plan

Overarching steps

1. Email to inform and recruit faculty, students
2. Two weeks later: reminder email and thanks
3. Following deadline: compile consent forms and send dates for focus groups for sign ups
   plus zoom room locations (google form)
4. Scheduled focus groups

Faculty timeline:

1. Week of reminder to all participants
   a. Reminder to complete survey
2. Day of: “See you today” email
   a. Reminder to complete survey

Students:

1. Week of reminder to all participants
2. Day of: “see you today” email

Following the completion of focus groups: Thank you email
Appendix C

Informed Consent

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

HOMEWOOD INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (HIRB)

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study Title: Variabilities in Online Graduate School Program Completion

Application No.: 1

Principal Investigator: Ranjini JohnBull, 2800 N. Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21218, dhollick@jhu.edu, 847-894-5327

You are being asked to join a research study. Participation in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to join now, you can change your mind later.

The person being asked to be in this research study may not be able to give consent to be in this study. You are therefore being asked to give permission for this person to be in the study as his/her decision maker.

1. Research Summary (Key Information):
The information in this section is intended to be an introduction to the study only. Complete details of the study are listed in the sections below. If you are considering participation in the study, the entire document should be discussed with you before you make your final decision. You can ask questions about the study now and at any time in the future.

Candidates seeking to complete a master’s degree in education have varying levels of success in finishing the degree. The researcher believes a deeper investigation of student motivations and connectedness along with faculty self-efficacy may reveal the reasons for the variance in completions of the program.

To develop this knowledge, a series of focus groups are being held hosting current continuing students and faculty members. Additionally, faculty will be asked to complete a survey.

During those groups, data will be collected through interview questions.

2. Why is this research being done?

This research is being done to develop adjunct faculty in supporting candidates as well as continuing students.

Adjunct faculty are a critical element of this program and knowing that they have the greatest candidate contact gathering information from them will support program improvement. The knowledge of their perspectives on teaching is essential to expanding the understanding of candidate success.
Students enrolled in the program have unique perspectives on their progression and work.

Current (Fall 2022) adjunct instructor roles in the Teacher Development Partnership program may join as well as past instructors within one academic year. Students who are in their second year of study beginning Fall 2022 may join the student groups.

3. **What will happen if you join this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things:

- Sign up for a focus group.
- Attend the focus group that meets your calendar.
- Reply to emails with requests to review transcripts or conceptual understandings by the researcher following the focus group.
- Complete surveys.

4. **What are the risks or discomforts of the study?**

You may get tired or bored when we are asking you questions or you are completing questionnaires. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to answer.

The risks associated with participation in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life [or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests].
5. **Are there benefits to being in the study?**

You will benefit from this study by supporting the program to better serve populations of students.

This study may benefit society if the results lead to a better understanding of faculty practices on diverse student populations.

6. **What are your options if you do not want to be in the study?**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You choose whether to participate.

If you decide not to participate, there are no penalties, and you will not lose any benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled.

If you do not join, your employment/education at Johns Hopkins will not be affected.

7. **Will it cost you anything to be in this study?**

No.

8. **Will you be paid if you join this study?**

No.

9. **Can you leave the study early?**

- You can agree to be in the study now and change your mind later, without any penalty or loss of benefits.
- If you wish to stop, please tell us right away.
• If you want to withdraw from the study, please notify Debbie Hollick via email (dhollick@jhu.edu).

• Leaving this study early will not affect your employment/education.

10. Why might we take you out of the study early?

   You may be taken out of the study if:

   • You fail to follow instructions.

   • The study is cancelled.

   • There may be other reasons to take you out of the study that we do not know at this time.

   If you are taken out of the study early, Johns Hopkins may use or give out your information that it has already collected if the information is needed for this study or any follow-up activities.

11. How will the confidentiality of your biospecimens and/or data be protected?

   Any study records that identify you will be kept confidential to the extent possible by law. The records from your participation may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including members of the Johns Hopkins University Homewood Institutional Review Board and officials from government agencies such as the National Institutes of Health and the Office for Human Research Protections. (All of these people are required to keep your identity confidential.) Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the
study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records.

12. **What other things should you know about this research study?**

**What is the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and how does it protect you?**

This study has been reviewed by an Institutional Review Board (IRB), a group of people that reviews human research studies. The IRB can help you if you have questions about your rights as a research participant or if you have other questions, concerns or complaints about this research study. You may contact the IRB at 410-516-6580 or hirb@jhu.edu.

**What should you do if you have questions about the study?**

Call the principal investigator, Deborah Hollick at [redacted]. If you wish, you may contact the principal investigator by letter. The address is on page one of this consent form. If you cannot reach the principal investigator or wish to talk to someone else, call the IRB office at 410-516-5680.

You can ask questions about this research study now or at any time during the study, by talking to the researcher(s) working with you or by calling Debbie Hollick at [redacted].

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or feel that you have not been treated fairly, please call the Homewood Institutional Review Board at Johns Hopkins University at (410) 516-6580.

**Future Contact**

We would like your permission for our research team to contact you in the future. Please note that your decision below does not prevent other researchers at Johns Hopkins University from contacting you about other research.
Please sign and date your choice below:

YES □ _________________________  ____________

Signature of Participant      Date

NO □ _________________________  ____________

Signature of Participant      Date

13. What does your signature on this consent form mean?

Your signature on this form means that: You understand the information given to you in this form, you accept the provisions in the form, and you agree to join the study.

You will not give up any legal rights by signing this consent form.

WE WILL GIVE YOU A COPY OF THIS SIGNED AND DATED CONSENT FORM

________________________________________________________________________________________

Signature of Participant      (Print Name)

Date/Time

________________________________________________________________________________________

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent     (Print Name)

Date/Time

NOTE: A COPY OF THE SIGNED, DATED CONSENT FORM MUST BE KEPT BY THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR; A COPY MUST BE GIVEN TO THE PARTICIPANT.
Appendix D

Oral Consent Script

Student researcher: Deborah Hollick

PI: Ranjini JohnBull, PhD

IRB # AM00015967

Oral Consent, part II

At the start of each focus group, Deborah will confirm consent again, reiterating the elements from the electronically gathered form. The script for this is below.

“Thank you for volunteering to participate in this research project investigating the Experiences of African American Female Candidates in an Online Graduate School Teacher Development Program.

As part of this research, I am requesting your permission to create and use video recordings of our focus groups. Any video recordings will not be used for advertising or non-study related purposes.

You should know that:

• You may request that the video recordings be stopped at any time.
• If you agree to allow the video recordings and then change your mind, you may ask us to destroy that recording.
• We will only use these video recordings for the purposes of this research.

You should also be reminded that Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You choose whether to participate.
If you decide not to participate, there are no penalties, and you will not lose any benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled.

If you do not join, your employment/education at Johns Hopkins will not be affected.

If you consent to continue, please state your name and Debbie will note for the record that you have consented.”
Appendix E

Interview Protocol

Students

Opening questions for both populations:
- Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself as [teacher/faculty] and as a [faculty/student] at Hopkins?
- What do you value most about this program?

Theoretical Construct (TC): Student Experience:
- Motivation
  - What part of this program created motivation for you to be successful?
  - What part of your personal history created motivation for you to be successful?
  - What would you wish for incoming students to know about motivation to be successful in this program?
- Connectedness
  - With whom did you create connections while in the program?
  - What elements of the program supported your development of connections with other students? Faculty?
  - What part of the connectedness has led to growth in your teaching career?

TC: Perceptions of Online Alternative Certification
- How do you describe your journey in an alternative certification program?
- What are the benefits of the online programming?
- What are the benefits of the alternative certification route?
Faculty

Opening questions for both populations:
- Without being humble, what do you value most about yourself as [teacher/faculty] and as a [faculty/student] at Hopkins?
- What do you value most about this program?

TC: Faculty Experience with online diverse population
- How has the program supported your teaching minoritized students?
- What would you wish for students to say about your influence on their teaching?
- What part of teaching minoritized students has contributed to your growth as an online educator?

TC: Faculty Self-Efficacy on teaching diverse population
- Is online learning as a meaningful learning experience?
- How has teaching online led to stronger learning for the student population?
- How has teaching online led to stronger learning for minoritized students?
- How has your teaching practice improved as a result of teaching a diverse population?