

# The Graduate School Navigation: The Experiences of First-Generation Black Women in Master's Programs

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## Research Introduction

Colleges and universities have seen an increase in accessibility for students of color, women, and students from low-income families (Helmbrecht & Ayars, 2021) It is common for our higher education institutions to explore the experiences and perspectives of first-generation undergraduate students. Colleges and universities also explore the Black student experience. However, understanding the experiences of both intersecting identities of being a first-generation student and a Black woman is layered. In this study, I chose to explore the perspectives of first-generation Black Women in Master's programs and the challenges those students may experience.

## Research Questions

**1. How do Black women first-generation Master's students describe their challenging experiences within their programs?**

**2. How do social contextual factors help to shape students' challenging experiences?**

## Literature Review

Despite the fact that we are speaking to graduate or Masters students, it does not imply that students fully understand the graduate program process or how to navigate this new environment (Lunceford, 2018).

First-generation students then grapple with their new student roles and requirements as a Master student as they transition into their institutions (Pascale, 2018).

## Methodology

To better understand the experiences of First-Generation Black women a *qualitative* approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was used for this research study

Seven Black women First-Generation students who are currently in or recently completed their Master's programs were interviewed. Majority of these students attended Predominantly White Institutions

Following the interviews, themes were constructed using the data collected from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018)

## Discussion

Similar to my research study, Black women in Doctoral programs at PWIs were faced with feeling isolated both on campus and at home (Shavers & Moore, 2019).

The results in this study indicate that there is academic related challenges that causes participants to refrain from engaging in the classroom. Apugo (2019) referred to this as an "academic mask" a strategy identified by Black women to navigate their degree completion.

## Results

Participants were confident that higher education and graduate school would be a goal or accomplishment for them in the future. However, some of their experiences presented some doubt and challenges in their new student roles.

Preparation within participants' individual programs were common. Students met with their Graduate advisors, attended program orientation, etc. However, some strategies or information felt hidden or missing from participants.

Some participants voiced that they felt support from their peers or professors, but continued to struggle with presenting as their full selves or belonging within their program.

Participants expressed their challenges with navigating the academic rigor but also how the responsibility of personal demands create additional stressors.

## Implications

In my research I did not explore the experiences of first-generation Black women besides those at Predominantly White institutions. Studies at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's), Ivy League colleges, and additional institutions may provide different lenses to the first-generation Black woman graduate experience.

Preparation within participants' individual programs were common. Students met with their Graduate advisors, attended program orientation, etc. Although some strategies or information felt hidden or missing from participants.

Developing a formal mentorship program between faculty and first-generation Black women may potentially improve the experiences of Black women at PWIs.

## Expressive Quotes

"With graduate education there is not a specific clear pathway on how to prepare if you are first-gen. For non-first generation students, there is an expectation that you're having these conversations at the dinner table. Or that you have someone before you who has succeeded and could help you bounce ideas off of, ask questions, and support you. When you're first-gen you don't have that, *luxury*."

"When I told my family that I applied to graduate school I somewhat watered it down like, 'Oh yeah, I'm considering getting my Master's degree.' My mom *still* does not understand."

## Selected References

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