

What Perceived Challenges Contribute to the Retention of Black Female Culinary Students at a Community College in Southern Louisiana?

Angela Wilson

Delgado Community College

Christy Hornsby

Northwestern State University

Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study examines the lived experiences of Black female culinary students who stopped out of and later returned to complete their education at a community college in the southern United States. While existing research on student retention often conceptualizes attrition as a permanent outcome, this study reframes persistence as a nonlinear process that includes temporary withdrawal and reentry. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors influencing stop-out decisions and the conditions that support students' return and completion. Data were collected through a focus group and open-ended questionnaires with participants who had experienced at least one stop-out period. Thematic analysis revealed that financial constraints, caregiving responsibilities, limited institutional communication, and misalignment between student needs and institutional structures contributed to stop-out behavior. Additionally, participants described experiences of racial and gender bias within both educational and professional culinary environments. Despite these challenges, findings indicate that self-efficacy, peer and faculty support, and aspirations for socioeconomic mobility and entrepreneurship played a significant role in motivating students to return and persist. The study also highlights the importance of culturally responsive practices and flexible institutional supports, including mentoring, improved communication, and curriculum alignment with diverse career pathways. These findings extend existing persistence frameworks by emphasizing the importance of intersectionality and structural context in understanding student success. Implications for practice include the need for more inclusive, adaptive, and student-centered approaches to retention. Future research should explore nonlinear persistence pathways across diverse populations and institutional contexts to further inform equitable educational practices.

Keywords: community college; culinary programs; Black female culinary students; culturally responsive practices

Introduction

This qualitative phenomenological study seeks to examine the lived experiences of Black female culinary students who have stopped out of community college culinary programs and subsequently returned to complete their education. Specifically, the study aims to identify the individual, institutional, and sociocultural factors that contribute to students' decisions to temporarily withdraw, as well as the mechanisms and supports that facilitate their reentry and persistence to completion. By centering participant voice, this study advances an interpretive understanding of how these students make meaning of their educational trajectories within the context of a historically inequitable culinary industry and broader systemic barriers in higher education.

Despite a substantial body of literature on student attrition, retention, and persistence, there remains a critical gap in research that explicitly examines the intersection of race, gender, and vocational context, particularly within culinary education (Harris & Giuffre, 2015; Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, 2015). Existing studies largely address general minority attrition or gender disparities in male-dominated professions but fail to account for the unique experiences of Black female culinary students, especially those who *stop out* and later return (Harris & Giuffre, 2015; Restaurant Opportunities Centers United, 2015; Yu & Jyawali, 2021). Moreover, the phenomenon of stop-out behavior as a nonlinear persistence pathway is under-theorized in literature. This study addresses this gap by focusing specifically on Black female students in culinary programs and by examining both departure and reentry as part of a continuous persistence process rather than discrete event.

Background and Purpose of the Study

This qualitative phenomenological study seeks to examine the lived experiences of Black female culinary students who have stopped out of community college culinary programs and subsequently returned to complete their education. Specifically, the study aims to identify the individual, institutional, and sociocultural factors that contribute to students' decisions to temporarily withdraw, as well as the mechanisms and supports that facilitate their reentry and persistence to completion. By centering participant voice, this study advances an interpretive understanding of how these students make meaning of their educational trajectories within the context of a historically inequitable culinary industry and broader systemic barriers in higher education.

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Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding this study is, *What perceived challenges contribute to the retention of Black female culinary students at a community college in Southern Louisiana?* The following are the research questions that guided this study:

Research Question 1. What personal, academic, and environmental factors contribute to Black female culinary students' decisions to stop out of their programs?

Research Question 2. What factors and supports influence their decisions to return and persist to completion?

Research Question 3. How do Black female culinary students perceive institutional structures (e.g., services, policies, programs, and supports) in hindering continuous enrollment and completion?

Significance and Problem of the Study

The purpose is to provide insight and discover commonalities among the issues shared by the participants. A phenomenological study begins with an appreciation and consideration of the thoughts and feelings of its subjects. The difficulties in a study of this nature arise from the challenges of interpreting the participants' experiences and the words and phrases the subjects use to express themselves (Mayo, 2014).

The outcomes of a study such as this will provide insight into the challenges of a specific demographic of students. Using this research to provide possible solutions to barriers to completion will provide valuable insight that may be generalizable to the broader population of students. Insight into these unique challenges could lead to strategies that ultimately increase graduation rates.

This study seeks to understand what motivates Black female culinary students to finish their education when faced with unforeseen challenges and barriers. Among the stakeholders who may find this research helpful are other researchers, education administrators, students, and women in the culinary field. Murrell et al. (1991) concluded that women seeking careers in male-dominated fields have higher educational aspirations than females seeking female-dominated careers. These aspirations sometimes delay marriage and family plans (Murrell et al., 1991). Women naturally assume that they will have family and work obligations, thus the reason for the delay. It can be assumed that family obligations can hinder the completion of educational goals.

Despite ongoing efforts to improve student retention and completion in higher education, significant disparities persist among racially and gender-marginalized populations, particularly within vocational and technical programs. In community college culinary programs, Black female students experience disproportionately high rates of stop-out, temporary withdrawal from enrollment, yet existing scholarship largely frames attrition as a terminal outcome rather than a nonlinear process that may include reentry and eventual completion. While prior research has examined general factors influencing student persistence and the underrepresentation of women and minorities in the culinary profession, there remains a critical lack of research that centers the intersecting experiences of race, gender, and vocational context (Harris & Giuffre, 2015; Long, 2016; Yu & Jyawali, 2021). Specifically, little is known about the factors that contribute to Black female culinary students' decisions to stop out, as well as the conditions that enable their return and persistence. This gap limits the ability of institutions to design targeted interventions that support continuous enrollment and completion for this population, thereby perpetuating inequities in both educational attainment and access to leadership pathways within the culinary industry.

Review of Related Literature

This study of the related literature identifies perceived challenges to Black female culinary students in completing their educational goals in an accredited culinary education program. The review of related research explores the role a chef plays in the culinary industry and how race, gender, and ethnicity affect aspiring chefs. This section explores and describes Black females' challenges in completing their culinary education.

Research indicates that barriers to all kinds of education, including culinary education, range from financial limitations to childcare challenges/access, campus climates, and cultural issues faced by women and minorities (Long, 2016). In contemporary Western culture, males have taken the stereotypical roles of providers, and women have functioned as caregivers (Sanatana, 2016; Sauer, 2022). World War II brought women into the workplace to replace an absent male workforce. When men returned from war, women were expected to return to domestic roles (Harris & Giuffre, 2015; Reynolds, 2008; Sanatana, 2016). The changing roles of women during this time contributed to a broader change in society where women began to consider themselves more than caregivers and keepers of the home (Reynolds, 2008; Sanatana, 2016). Post WWII, women have successfully challenged gender barriers in traditionally male professions (Sanatana, 2016). Women of all backgrounds are completing post-secondary education at higher rates than men. Yet, educational environments have not adapted to the new female student body majority and their needs (Ross et al., 2016). To a large extent, women are still primarily responsible for caring for households, children, and, often, elderly relatives (Haddaji et al., 2017; Sauer, 2022; Terriquez & Gurantz, 2015). Further, women can often be singularly responsible for all of these obligations in the home (Haddaji et al., 2017; Sauer, 2022; Terriquez & Gurantz, 2015). This problem begs the question: Why has the education system not adapted to accommodate the needs of these students?

Popularity of Chef as a Profession

Vogel et al. found that in the last 20 years, the culinary arts industry has seen growth driven by entertainment value and media (2021). The increasing visibility of the culinary profession through television and social media has played a significant role in shaping perceptions of the field and influencing individuals' decisions to pursue culinary education. Media platforms such as Food Network and Cooking Channel (Cooper, 2011), along with digital platforms like TikTok and YouTube, have popularized the image of the chef as a creative, prestigious, and highly visible profession, often emphasizing success, artistry, and celebrity status. Hashtags, such as #food and #foodporn, have billions of views (Neerej & Kiran, 2021; Sonde, 2021). However, these portrayals frequently obscure the structural realities of the culinary industry, including its historically White male dominance, demanding work environments, and limited advancement opportunities for women and minorities. For Black female culinary students, this disconnect between media-driven expectations and lived educational and professional experiences may contribute to disillusionment, identity conflict, and challenges in persistence. As students encounter barriers such as gendered expectations, racial marginalization, and competing caregiving responsibilities, the contrast between anticipated and actual experiences may influence decisions to stop out, as well as the conditions under which they return. Thus, media representations are not merely peripheral influences but function as a critical contextual factor shaping both entry into culinary education and subsequent persistence pathways for this population.

Barriers and Sacrifices

Albors et al. (2021) conducted a study in the United States, France, and Spain that revealed that overcoming barriers to success as a chef required sacrificing family, entertaining,

traveling, and friends. Additionally, Albors et al. found that among the higher-end chefs, mentoring was a salient factor for female chefs' objective successes and this group's self-perceptions of success. Women seem to handle the harsh environments of professional kitchens better if they have had a solid mentoring presence, presumably because this prepares them for the reality of what is facing them in that culture (Albors et al., 2021). Albors et al. cited examples from such memoirs of Chefs Gabrielle Hamilton and Anthony Bourdain to reinforce the positive nature of a mentor (2021).

In 2019, Chef Mariya Russell became the first Black woman to earn a Michelin Star in an industry that undervalues minorities and women (Burke, 2019). Michelin Star restaurants are generally harsh environments in which to work (Garrigos et al., 2020). Being a cook or a chef demands dedication to extreme work environments, both physically and mentally. Due to this, women are often excluded from the macho male clique that forms in many kitchens (Albors et al., 2021). Literature in this subject area broadly indicates that Black women are not encouraged to aspire to higher ranks in the professional kitchen. The public expectations for advancement are lower than for other genders and races in the same position. Research shows that female chefs job craft to adapt to the masculine environment by taking on male characteristics in their tone of voice and manner, stifling emotions, proving themselves by not asking for help, hiding femininity in a uniform, and not wearing makeup (Albors et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020; Druckman, 2010; Harris & Giuffre, 2010; Nettles-Barcelon et al., 2015; Yu & Jyawali, 2021). Black women may take this to a greater extreme by trying to avoid being stereotyped (Nettles-Barcelon et al., 2015; Wilson, 2021).

Relevance in Education

Student persistence and attrition remain central concerns within higher education, as retention is widely recognized as a key indicator of institutional effectiveness and program success (Holzer, 2015). While academic performance is often emphasized, the literature consistently demonstrates that student success is multidimensional, shaped by campus culture, inclusivity, and the quality of institutional support (Glocke, 2015). For example, a substantial proportion of college students discontinue their studies, in part due to limited engagement with advisors, faculty, and institutional support systems (Holzer, 2015). This concern is particularly salient for Black students enrolled in predominantly White institutions, where the presence of culturally responsive communities, meaningful institutional support, and inclusive campus climates has been shown to positively influence academic performance and persistence (Cook, 2022; Kolodner, 2017). Disparities in faculty representation further compound these challenges, as the underrepresentation of racially diverse faculty may limit access to relatable role models and mentorship opportunities for underrepresented students (Davis & Fry, 2020; Long, 2016).

Beyond issues of representation and culture, student attrition is also influenced by psychological, structural, and contextual factors. Research indicates that students' decisions to persist are shaped more by interest, perceived value, and program costs than by academic ability alone (Bargmann et al., 2022). Additionally, gendered experiences within academic programs, particularly in gender-atypical fields, can negatively impact persistence due to marginalization, reduced confidence, and unsupportive learning environments (Meyer & Straub, 2019). Consistent with Tinto's model of student retention, these findings reinforce the importance of both academic and social integration in promoting student persistence. Within culinary education specifically, prior research has identified attendance, academic performance, financial constraints, and personal

responsibilities as primary contributors to student withdrawal (Frigaard, 2010). Collectively, this body of literature underscores the necessity for institutions to adopt comprehensive, equity-oriented strategies, such as mentoring, targeted interventions, and community-building initiatives, to address the complex and intersecting barriers that influence student retention and success.

Relevance and Issues

Student attrition and stop-out behavior remain critical concerns in higher education, as failure to complete a degree often results in increased financial burden without the corresponding economic or professional benefits (Long, 2016; Mesmin, 2018). This outcome underscores the institutional responsibility to provide comprehensive academic and psychological support systems that foster student confidence and persistence (Mesmin, 2018). Students who interrupt or discontinue their education frequently experience heightened stress, anxiety, and financial strain, although some may reframe stopping out as partial progress rather than failure (Belzer, 1998). Despite this nuance, the cumulative impact of unmet needs, particularly among historically marginalized populations, reinforces the necessity for institutions to move beyond generalized support models and implement targeted, student-centered interventions.

For Black female culinary students specifically, these challenges are compounded by structural and cultural dynamics within both higher education and the culinary field. The dominant Eurocentric foundations of culinary education, rooted in French culinary traditions, often fail to reflect the cultural identities and contributions of diverse populations, limiting opportunities for students to see themselves represented within the curriculum. At the same time, broader educational systems continue to reflect normative White cultural standards, which may disadvantage students whose backgrounds and experiences differ from these norms (Nelson-Barber & Harrison, 1996; Walden University, 2021). These systemic conditions intersect with

documented industry barriers, including underrepresentation, racialized stereotypes, and gendered expectations that shape how Black women are perceived and supported within culinary spaces.

Addressing these disparities requires institutions to align retention strategies with the lived experiences of their students. Evidence suggests that personalized support models, such as mentoring, culturally responsive advising, and community-building initiatives, can improve student outcomes, particularly for underrepresented and first-generation populations (Navarro, 2014). For Black female culinary students, this includes not only academic and financial support but also intentional efforts to integrate diverse cultural perspectives into curriculum and instruction. Incorporating inclusive content, representation, and experiential learning opportunities can strengthen students' sense of belonging and professional identity without compromising the technical rigor of culinary training. Collectively, these strategies position institutions to more effectively mitigate attrition by addressing both the structural and cultural barriers that shape student persistence.

Methodology

Design of the Study

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of Black female culinary students who experienced a stop-out period during their enrollment at a community college in Southern Louisiana. Phenomenology was selected as the guiding methodology to capture participants' subjective interpretations of persistence, interruption, and return, with particular attention to the meaning they ascribed to these experiences. Data were collected primarily through a semi-structured focus group, supplemented by open-ended questionnaire responses to enhance depth and support data triangulation. The focus group format

facilitated collective reflection and interaction among participants, allowing for the emergence of shared meanings as well as divergent perspectives.

To strengthen analytic rigor, qualitative data were analyzed using a systematic thematic analysis approach informed by phenomenological principles. Audio recordings from the focus group were transcribed verbatim and reviewed alongside scribe notes to ensure accuracy and capture contextual elements such as tone and nonverbal cues. Data analysis followed an iterative, multi-phase process. First, the researcher engaged in initial open coding by reading transcripts multiple times to identify significant statements and meaning units related to participants' experiences with retention, stop-out, and return. Second, these codes were grouped into broader categories through constant comparison, allowing patterns and relationships across participant responses to emerge. Third, categories were synthesized into overarching themes that reflected shared aspects of the phenomenon while preserving the nuance of individual experiences.

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, data from the focus group were compared with questionnaire responses to confirm consistency and identify convergent themes. Discrepancies were examined to refine thematic interpretations rather than eliminated, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' voices. Additionally, the researcher maintained an audit trail of coding decisions and theme development to support transparency. This analytic process resulted in a set of themes that represent the structural, cultural, and personal factors influencing the retention of Black female culinary students, providing a coherent and evidence-based foundation for the findings presented in this study.

Results and Summary of Findings

This study examined the perceived challenges influencing the retention, stop-out, and return of Black female culinary students at a community college in Southern Louisiana. Data were

collected through a focus group (n = 7) and supporting questionnaires (n = 17) and analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach. Three primary themes emerged across the data: (a) competing life responsibilities, (b) financial and structural barriers, and (c) institutional communication and support gaps. These themes were consistent across both focus group discussions and questionnaire responses, with minor variations in emphasis.

Theme 1: Competing Life Responsibilities

Participants consistently described competing life responsibilities, particularly family obligations, employment demands, and health concerns, as primary contributors to stopping out of school. Many participants identified caregiving roles, including parenting and caring for extended family members, as barriers to continuous enrollment. These responsibilities were often compounded by full-time employment, resulting in limited time for academic engagement and increased burnout. As one participant explained, “I had to choose between school and livelihood,” reflecting the tension between financial survival and educational persistence.

Health-related challenges also contributed to interruptions in enrollment, though less frequently than family and work obligations. Across both data sources, these factors were not isolated; rather, participants described them as interconnected pressures that collectively influenced their decision to stop out. Notably, these same responsibilities later served as motivators for returning to complete their programs, particularly in the desire to serve as role models for their children and families.

Theme 2: Financial and Structural Barriers

Financial instability emerged as a dominant theme influencing both withdrawal and re-enrollment decisions. Participants reported challenges related to tuition costs, childcare expenses,

and the need to maintain employment while enrolled. Questionnaire responses further reinforced that financial strain was often intertwined with other barriers, such as lack of childcare or transportation. For example, one participant noted the difficulty of balancing financial obligations with academic demands, stating that even with scholarships, “work always turns out to be the bigger priority.”

Structural barriers within the institution also contributed to persistence challenges. Participants identified inflexible scheduling, limited course availability (particularly evening options), and restrictive financial aid requirements as obstacles to continuous enrollment. Policies requiring full-time enrollment for financial aid eligibility were described as particularly problematic for students managing work and family responsibilities. These findings suggest that institutional structures may inadvertently disadvantage nontraditional students who require flexibility to remain enrolled.

Theme 3: Institutional Communication and Support Gaps

A third major theme involved gaps in institutional communication, advising, and support systems. Participants expressed a need for more personalized advising, clearer communication between departments, and greater transparency regarding academic requirements and financial aid processes. These concerns were reflected in both group discussions and questionnaire responses, with participants emphasizing confusion around course sequencing, graduation requirements, and available resources.

In addition to communication challenges, participants identified unmet needs related to academic and material support. These included access to childcare, transportation assistance, food security programs, and learning resources such as textbooks, technology, and culinary tools. Many

participants also expressed a desire for expanded experiential learning opportunities, including internships and community-based culinary experiences.

Importantly, participants highlighted the value of relational support in promoting persistence. Encouragement from family, peers, and instructors played a significant role in students' decisions to return and complete their programs. Several participants described a sense of collective resilience, noting that shared experiences with classmates helped reduce feelings of isolation and foster motivation to persist.

Summary of Findings

Across all research questions, the findings indicate that retention for Black female culinary students is shaped by the intersection of personal, financial, and institutional factors. While competing for life responsibilities and financial constraints often prompted students to stop out, internal motivation and relational support facilitated their return. However, persistent gaps in institutional communication, advising, and structural flexibility suggest opportunities for improvement in supporting continuous enrollment.

These themes collectively demonstrate that student persistence is not solely an individual responsibility but is significantly influenced by institutional practices and support systems. Addressing these interconnected barriers is essential for improving retention outcomes and creating more equitable educational environments for Black female culinary students.

Interpretation of Findings

First, the prioritization of family over education was a defining influence on participants' educational trajectories. Consistent with culturally grounded perspectives, many participants described decision-making processes in which the well-being of family members took precedence over individual academic goals. This finding aligns with prior research suggesting that students

from collectivist-oriented backgrounds may prioritize familial obligations over personal advancement (Gay, 2002). Participants frequently identified caregiving responsibilities, including parenting and supporting extended family members, as primary reasons for stopping out. Importantly, these same family-centered values later functioned as motivators for returning to complete their education, particularly in the desire to serve as role models and improve economic opportunities for their families. This dual role of family, as both a barrier and a motivator, highlights the need for institutions to recognize and accommodate the complex realities of students' lived experiences.

Second, financial and life stability emerged as critical conditions for persistence and re-enrollment. Participants consistently reported that their ability to return to school was contingent upon improved financial circumstances, such as securing stable employment, accessing family support, or experiencing changes in caregiving responsibilities as children matured. These findings reinforce the understanding that stop-out behavior is often situational rather than indicative of a lack of commitment or capability. Instead, students demonstrated resilience and long-term goal orientation, returning to complete their programs once conditions allowed. This interpretation challenges deficit-oriented narratives and suggests that institutional policies must account for non-linear educational pathways, particularly for nontraditional and working adult students.

Third, the findings reveal a significant gap between available institutional resources and students' awareness or utilization of those resources. Participants expressed frustration with advising, course scheduling, financial aid processes, and general navigation of the college system. Notably, several supports identified as "needed" by participants, such as food assistance, technology access, and advising services, were already available at the institution but were not effectively communicated or accessed. This disconnect suggests that the issue is not solely the

absence of resources but also the effectiveness of institutional communication and outreach. From an institutional perspective, this represents a critical area for intervention, as improving transparency, advising structures, and information dissemination may have a direct impact on student retention.

Collectively, these findings suggest that retention for Black female culinary students is best understood through a holistic lens that integrates cultural, economic, and institutional dimensions. The results emphasize that persistence is not simply a function of academic preparedness but is deeply embedded in the broader context of students' lives. Institutions that seek to improve retention outcomes must therefore move beyond generalized support models and adopt intentional, culturally responsive, and clearly communicated strategies that align with the lived realities of their student populations.

Implications For Practice and Policy

The findings of this study suggest that improving persistence among Black female culinary students requires institutional shifts that extend beyond traditional retention strategies to include culturally responsive, structurally informed, and student-centered approaches. Participants' experiences highlight the need for community colleges to reconceptualize stop-out behavior not as failure, but as part of a nonlinear persistence pathway. Institutions should therefore design flexible reentry systems, proactive advising structures, and targeted communication strategies that acknowledge the complex realities students navigate. For example, the underutilization of existing resources, such as entrepreneurship programming, underscores a critical disconnect between institutional offerings and student awareness. This suggests that improving persistence is not solely a matter of increasing services, but of ensuring that those services are effectively communicated, accessible, and aligned with students' lived experiences and career aspirations.

Additionally, the findings point to the importance of fostering a stronger sense of belonging and relational engagement within the community college environment. Participants identified limited communication, lack of guidance, and minimal institutional connection as barriers to continuous enrollment. Implementing structured mentoring models, intrusive advising practices, and regular academic progress audits may mitigate these challenges by providing consistent, personalized support. Such approaches are particularly critical for students balancing academic responsibilities with caregiving, employment, and other external demands. Creating a more connected and inclusive campus culture may enhance students' ability to navigate institutional systems and persist through periods of disruption.

Implications also extend to curriculum design and pedagogical practice within culinary education. The dominance of Eurocentric culinary traditions, particularly French classical frameworks, may inadvertently marginalize the cultural identities and contributions of Black female students. Integrating culturally responsive teaching practices that elevate diverse culinary traditions can enhance student engagement, identity affirmation, and academic relevance. By validating the cultural capital students bring into the classroom, culinary programs can create more inclusive learning environments that support both persistence and professional identity development. This shift not only benefits students but also aligns with broader industry needs for diversity, equity, and innovation in culinary practice.

Finally, the findings suggest a need to expand career preparation pathways beyond traditional employment trajectories within the commercial kitchen. Participants expressed interest in entrepreneurship as an alternative to navigating exclusionary workplace cultures indicates that institutions should more intentionally integrate small business development, financial literacy, and entrepreneurial training into culinary curricula. Supporting students in pursuing diverse career

pathways may serve as both a retention strategy and a mechanism for disrupting inequitable industry structures. Collectively, these implications underscore the necessity of aligning institutional practices, curriculum, and support systems with the intersecting realities of race, gender, and vocational identity to better support Black female culinary students' persistence and success.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study extend and refine Vincent Tinto's model of student retention by illustrating how belonging, social integration, and motivation operate within the intersecting contexts of race, gender, and vocational education. Consistent with Tinto's (2015) assertion that students persist when they experience a sense of connection and mattering within an institution, participants in this study emphasized the critical role of communication, peer relationships, and faculty support in shaping their decisions to remain enrolled or return after stopping out. However, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that for Black female culinary students, belonging is not merely a function of academic and social integration but is also mediated by culturally specific experiences, including marginalization, stereotyping, and identity negotiation within a historically White male-dominated field. These findings suggest that Tinto's framework may be strengthened by more explicitly accounting for intersectionality and the role of culturally responsive institutional practices in fostering meaningful inclusion. Additionally, the data supports the notion that persistence is socially reinforced, as participants described peer and faculty encouragement as pivotal in their decision to return, aligning with Tinto's proposition that student motivation is influenced by collective engagement and shared commitment.

The study further contributes to theory by highlighting the role of self-efficacy as a critical mechanism within persistence pathways, particularly in the context of stop-out and reentry.

Participants' belief in their ability to succeed emerged as a key factor influencing their return to culinary education, reinforcing Tinto's (2015) emphasis on the importance of confidence and perceived capability in overcoming barriers. However, this study also underscores how self-efficacy is shaped by external social forces, including exposure to stereotypes and institutional climate. Participants' experiences with racialized and gendered stereotypes, such as the *Angry Black Woman* trope, illustrate how identity-based challenges can undermine confidence and persistence, suggesting that self-efficacy should be understood as both an individual and socially constructed phenomenon. These findings extend existing literature by situating self-efficacy within broader systems of inequity and highlighting the need for institutional practices that actively counter deficit narratives and affirm students' identities.

Finally, the findings align with and extend Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (see Figure 1) by demonstrating how basic, psychological, and self-fulfillment needs intersect to influence educational persistence. Participants' experiences suggest that unmet physiological and safety needs, such as financial stability, caregiving responsibilities, and work obligations, often necessitate temporary withdrawal from education. However, once these foundational needs are stabilized, students are more likely to reengage with their academic goals, particularly when they perceive education as valuable to their long-term success. This supports Maslow's theoretical progression while also extending it by illustrating how individuals may move fluidly between levels in response to life circumstances, particularly in nontraditional student populations. Furthermore, the findings highlight the role of institutions in supporting movement through these levels by providing flexible structures, such as make-up lab opportunities, adaptable deadlines, and career mentoring. Collectively, these results suggest that persistence frameworks should incorporate both motivational and structural dimensions, recognizing that students' ability to

remain enrolled is contingent upon the alignment of institutional support with their evolving life needs.

Figure 1

Nonlinear Persistence Pathways of Black Female Culinary Students

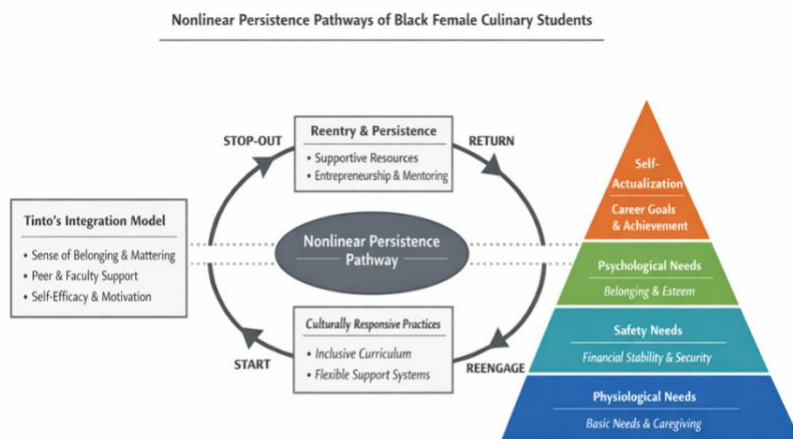


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Integrating Tinto's Integration Model and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs on the Nonlinear Persistence Pathways of Black Female Culinary Students.

Note. The conceptual framework that integrated theory with persistence pathways was created using ChatGPT.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should extend this study by examining the persistence and stop-out experiences of Black female culinary students across diverse institutional contexts and geographic regions to enhance transferability and deepen understanding of this phenomenon. Given that this study was conducted within a single community college setting, replication across multiple institutions, including technical colleges, private culinary schools, and four-year programs, would allow for comparative analysis of institutional structures, campus climates, and support systems. Additionally, future studies should explore whether the nonlinear persistence pathways identified in this research are consistent across other student populations, including different racial and ethnic

groups, genders, and disciplines. Such comparative work would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how intersectional identities shape educational experiences and persistence outcomes.

Further research is also needed to examine the long-term effectiveness of institutional interventions designed to support persistence, particularly those related to communication strategies, mentoring programs, and culturally responsive practices. Quantitative and mixed-methods studies could assess the impact of targeted initiatives, such as intrusive advising, entrepreneurship programming, and flexible academic policies, on retention, stop-out, and reentry rates. In addition, future scholarship should more closely investigate the role of curriculum in shaping student engagement and identity development, particularly the dominance of Eurocentric culinary traditions and the potential for more culturally inclusive approaches. Expanding the focus beyond students, research should also explore the lived experiences of Black female chefs within the professional culinary industry to better understand how educational experiences align with or diverge from workplace realities. Collectively, these lines of inquiry would advance both theoretical and practical knowledge by addressing the intersection of race, gender, culture, and vocational identity within culinary education and the broader hospitality industry.

Conclusions

The purpose of this section is to present the principal conclusions and discuss the findings of this study. The three primary research questions are as follows: **Research Question 1.** What personal, academic, and environmental factors contribute to Black female culinary students' decisions to stop out of their programs? **Research Question 2.** What factors and supports influence their decisions to return and persist to completion? **Research Question 3.** How do Black female

culinary students perceive institutional structures (e.g., services, policies, programs, and supports) in hindering continuous enrollment and completion?

Table 1

Common answers to the research questions

Question Number	Most Prevalent Answers
Research Question 1	Familial obligation, financial, lack of communication
Research Question 2	Change in familial situation, financial, free time
Research Question 3	Advising, tutoring, better communication, financial Aid, technology support, flexible scheduling, daycare, food insecurity, variety of classes, Academic assistance, technology

Note. This indicates the data analysis for the focus group and questionnaire questions.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on student persistence by centering the lived experiences of Black female culinary students navigating nonlinear educational pathways. The findings reveal that participants encountered a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and personal challenges that influenced their decisions to stop out and, ultimately, return to complete their education. Consistent with prior research, systemic inequities within both educational institutions and the culinary industry continue to shape these experiences, particularly for individuals occupying intersecting marginalized identities. Participants described a misalignment between institutional expectations and their lived realities as nontraditional students, many of whom balance academic pursuits with caregiving responsibilities and financial obligations. These findings reinforce the argument that persistence cannot be understood solely

through traditional linear models but must instead account for the dynamic and evolving circumstances that shape students' educational trajectories.

Importantly, the study highlights that persistence among Black female culinary students is not solely hindered by barriers but is also sustained by strong motivational factors, including aspirations for socioeconomic mobility, personal fulfillment, and the desire to serve as role models within their families and communities. Despite facing systemic bias, gendered and racialized stereotypes, and structural limitations within both education and industry, participants demonstrated resilience and a continued commitment to completing their credentials. However, their experiences underscore a critical need for institutions to evolve in ways that better support diverse student populations. This includes rethinking rigid academic structures, enhancing communication and access to resources, and aligning curricula with students' career aspirations, including entrepreneurship. As the demographic composition of higher education continues to shift, institutions must move beyond traditional models and adopt more inclusive, flexible, and culturally responsive approaches to ensure that all students, not just those who fit the historical norm, are positioned to succeed.

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Author Biographies

Dr. Angela Wilson is a pastry instructor at Delgado Community College in New Orleans. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, she is a Certified Executive Pastry Chef and Culinary Educator. She holds an EdD in Adult Learning and Development from Northwestern State University and has international culinary experience, including Australia.

Dr. Christy L. Hornsby serves at Northwestern State University, where she earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees. She holds a Doctor of Educational Leadership in Higher Education Administration from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Her scholarship and collaborative research with doctoral students have received state and regional awards.