

GRADUATE THEOLOGY SCHOOL CHOICE:  
AN EXAMINATION OF RACIAL/ETHNIC MINORITY  
MASTER OF DIVINITY STUDENTS

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## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explores the graduate school choice of U.S. racial/ethnic minorities enrolled in a Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree program. The school choice process is generally defined by contextual layers as framed in Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice: (1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context. While abundant previous literature exists regarding undergraduate school choice, such literature is relatively small for graduate school choice. Moreover, there is no current literature that specifically examines the graduate theology choice process for racial/ethnic students in MDiv programs. The increasing racial/ethnic presence in MDiv programs requires a focus on graduate school choice for these racial/ethnic students. The aim of the study is to fulfill a crucial scholarship gap in theological education.

Through individual in-depth interviews, the goal of the study was to discover how the school choice process unfolded for racial/ethnic students enrolled in an MDiv program by listening to the individual narratives of these students. Drawing on a conceptual model that integrates both economic and sociological perspectives, this study assumed that students' graduate school decisions are determined, at least in part, by their habitus. Thus, particular attention was given to the students' habitus, or the system of values and beliefs that shapes their views and interpretations. Similarly, focus was given to the structural and cultural factors, or organizational habitus, experienced within the undergraduate and other institutional contexts from which racial/ethnic MDiv students emerge. Measures of social and cultural capital that

include race, financial resources, and academic preparation and achievement play an important role in explaining the educational decisions of racial/ethnic students. By exploring these influences, this study offers insights into the graduate theology school choice of racial/ethnic MDiv students.

The research adds critical knowledge to a growing body of research related to graduate school choice and begin to aid theological schools in understanding the factors that attribute to racial/ethnic minorities enrollment in theology school. Gaining such knowledge enables theological institutions to better prepare for an ever growing diverse student population.

## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated to Sylvia A. Jones, who has taught me lessons in love, education, and life.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

WHY? We work so hard—all of us—to keep these institutions going, to make it through one more cycle of changes and challenges. Why do it at all? There are lots of voices asking questions about the value of theological education. In some contexts, there are fewer full-time jobs, and people are asking about the wisdom of people investing three years of graduate study for a job that can barely pay a full-time wage. In other contexts, megachurches have suggested that they can train pastors for the work of twenty-first-century congregational life better than seminaries can. Then, there are always the people who contend that theological faculty members are too often theologically wrong-headed and threaten the faith of students more than they nurture it. There are people saying that ministers would be better off going to business school rather than seminary and learning how to be entrepreneurs or effective organizational leaders rather than learning church history and the theological constructs that undergird the witness of the church. Why are you working so hard at what you are doing? (Aleshire, 2013, p.1)

The foundations of theological education have become an increasing concern among those who provide graduate education to individuals interested in ministry professions.

Responding to the concern effectively impacts the work of theological educators and those who pursue this type of graduate endeavor.

As the Executive Director of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and well-respected theological educator, Dan O. Aleshire (2013) seeks to provide an answer to the why question, he reaches for a recent tragedy now etched in the psyche of Americans – a painful Friday morning when 26 first graders and six adults were killed in a Connecticut elementary school. Aleshire (2013) began to wonder about the role of the congregations in the small Connecticut community of Newtown the day of the shootings and beyond. Thus, he interviewed three Newtown pastors: “Mel Kawakami is pastor of the United Methodist Church, which is located very near the Sandy Hook Elementary School; Matt Crebbin serves the Newtown Congregational Church, the oldest congregation in Newtown; and Jack Tanner is pastor of the Newtown Christian Church. These pastors told a story about tender ministry at a terrible time” (Aleshire, 2013, para. 7). As their stories unfold, they share about the gift of presence as a

religious act when words will not suffice. The pastors helped with community organizing, cared for individuals, worked with the Red Cross to set up operations in the church basement, planned memorial services, and comforted those in need (Aleshire, 2013). Church people provided meals, space for silence and prayer, and offered care. The interview with the pastor of the Newtown Christian Church, Aleshire (2013) reported:

Jack Tanner got a call from someone in the city office building. The staff was feeling overwhelmed—not by the end-of-the-year workload—but because everyone who came in to pay a tax bill or do business was burdened and unable to talk about much else than the tragedy. The staff wondered if someone would come and read some Scripture and pray with them, which Jack did. When I asked how this event had affected him, Jack said that he had a deepened awareness that real ministry is not in the pulpit but with the people—meeting them where they are. “People need reassurance that God is present and cares, and that it is often best expressed in simple ways.” (p. 3)

Though the media and the nation’s focus have left Newtown, those pastors remain. They continue to address issues of theodicy and lament. Congregations responded and continue to respond. Newtown teaches us how crucial religion can be to our individual and communal care. Amid tragedies, no matter the scale, there is a need for knowledgeable and imaginative ministry. Aleshire poignantly proclaims,

Congregations need leadership. Just as I can’t imagine the community getting through a crisis like this one without congregations, I can’t imagine congregations facing a time like this without leaders. Mel Kawakami is a graduate of Harvard University Divinity School, Matt Crebbin of Andover Newton Theological School, and Jack Tanner of Lincoln Christian University. They learned both how to think theologically and how to work pastorally. Their theological education introduced them to the hard questions of life, gave them counsel in the care of souls, and sharpened their sensitivities about the work of church in society. Newtown residents do not know how much these pastors have read or studied; all they know is that these pastors knew when silence was ministry, when presence was ministry, when action was ministry, when liturgy was ministry, and when public witness was ministry. There is a correlation between effective and theologically articulate ministry and theological education. (pp. 4-5)

Yet, just as essential to the question of *why* theological education is the question of *whom*. Who are those called out to serve in ministry professions? In an interview with Aleshire when

asked about the most significant changes in seminary education, he responded that it is the accumulating diversity of theological schools (Crosby, 2011). Further, Aleshire responds, “The percentage of students of color is increasing at ATS schools. We have a project currently underway called *Preparing for 2040*—that is the time when the population of color in the U.S. for the first time will be greater than the white population. We are currently educating the students at ATS schools who, if they spend their career in ministry, will span that transitional period” (Crosby, 2011, p.4).

The growing racial/ethnic diversity in higher education is evident with the increasing number of minorities attending graduate school. Just as with undergraduate enrollment, racial/ethnic minority student enrollment in graduate school has risen significantly over the past 30 years. In 2010, the percent of total graduate enrollment in the U.S. increased from 6 to 12 percent for Blacks, from 2 to 6 percent for Hispanics, and from 2 to 7 percent for Asians/Pacific Islanders (NCES, 2010). In that same year, an increase in graduate school enrollment for Whites is also evident, but the percentage share of total enrollment decreased for Whites from 85 to 64 percent (NCES, 2010). Thus, while the percentage share of Whites enrolled in graduate schools has decreased, the comparative percentage of minority students has increased.

Yet while racial/ethnic minority student enrollment in a variety of graduate and professional schools has fluctuated over the years, enrollment in graduate theology school is consistently growing at an increasing rate. For instance, there were modest increases in earned master’s and doctoral degrees by underrepresented minorities in science and engineering with more significant rises in social, behavioral, and natural sciences (National Science Board, 2002). However, the proportion of black students and Mexican-American students enrolled in law school dropped significantly according to Columbia Law School, after they examined data from

the Law School Admissions Council (Sieben, 2011). A panel discussion sponsored by Catholic University's law school discussed the drop in the number of black and Mexican-American students and the responsibility of law schools to address the issue (Sieben, 2011). According to the Columbia Law School report, although the size of first-year law classes increased across the country by 3,000 slots from 1993 – 2008, black students in law school decreased by 7.5 percent and Mexican-American students decreased by nearly 12 percent (Sieben, 2011). Nevertheless, there are minority student gains in some graduate professional schools, according to statistics released by the Association of American Medical Colleges and data from the Association for Theological Schools (ATS). In 2010, medical school enrollment grew overall by 1.5 percent, but it increased by 9 percent among Hispanic students, by 2.9 percent among black students, and by 24.8 percent among American Indians (Mytelka, 2010). Further, racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in graduate theological education grew from 13 percent in 1990 to more than 24 percent in 2009, according to ATS data (Aleshire, 2010). Despite the various decreases and unpredictability in overall enrollment in graduate and professional enrollment, there are a significant and growing percentage of minority students in graduate theology school.

The shifts in the religious environment and those attracted to theology schools will have lasting consequences on theological institutions of the future. Growth in the number of racial/ethnic students enrolling in graduate theology school has attributed to nearly all the growth in Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree programs across the U.S. (Aleshire, 2010). In recent years, graduate theological education has faced a shift among those pursuing the Master of Divinity degree (ATS Annual Data Tables, 2011). Data sets provided by the Association for Theological Schools (ATS) accreditation body indicates the number of racial/ethnic students enrolled in ATS schools have increased over the last decade, with persons of color and women accounting for all

the growth in enrollment since 1990 (Aleshire, 2010). In 1981-82, students of color from African, Asian, and Hispanic origin accounted for 8 percent of total enrollment, while this past academic year these students constituted 27 percent of total enrollment (Aleshire, 2012).

As the United States is increasingly becoming non-White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008) and there is a need to educate racial/ethnic minorities to meet the needs of the changing demographics, graduate theological schools need to adapt (Aleshire, 2010). The U.S. population is approximately one-third minority, but racial/ethnic minorities are expected to become the majority in 2042 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Further, the growing racial/ethnic diversity of the U.S. and thus the composition of higher education will continue to have a dramatic influence on students who engage theological education as well as on institutions themselves.

With more students from different racial backgrounds completing a bachelor's degree, it seems that institutions across the country are considering strategies that attract diversity. According to a noted expert and scholar in the field, Marybeth Gasman (2011), considering race in admissions is vital to a robust learning environment. Guidelines from the Obama administration to ensure diversity in higher education suggest that an institution could consider an applicant's first-generation college status, socioeconomic status, and other race-neutral criteria if doing so would help attract students from different racial backgrounds to the institution (Gasman, 2011). She goes on to ask vital questions like, "Do we think about how students have been mentored and the access (or lack of) they have to social capital?" (Gasman, 2011, para. 2). Achieving diversity in graduate and professional schools is the work of institutions and the individual students who seek post-baccalaureate education. There is strong support that student body diversity significantly and positively affects student involvement in diversity experiences

and positively influences student learning in higher education (Astin, 1993a; Gurin, 1999; Hurtado, 1997, 1999).

The process of how racial/ethnic students choose the MDiv program is not clear. Amid all the change occurring within theological education, the student profile of those attending theology schools has shifted dramatically with more racial/ethnic minority students seeking graduate ministry degrees (Wheeler, 2001). What is known about some MDiv students is that over 60 percent considered graduate theology school before or during college, while 24 percent first considered the MDiv after some type of work experience (ATS ESQ Total School Profile, 2012-2013). Most first-year students enrolled in the MDiv most likely learned about their degree program from a friend, graduate, or pastor (ATS ESQ Total School Profile, 2012-2013). Further, entering students in theological education ranked the following as the most important factors in the decision to pursue theological education and the MDiv in particular: 1) experienced a call from God, 2) opportunity to study and growth, 3) desire to serve others, 4) intellectual interest in religious/theological questions, and 5) a desire to make a difference in the life of the church (ATS ESQ Total School Profile, 2012-2013). These data, however, do not specify the school choice process for racial/ethnic minority students. The current milieu in theological education provides the opportunity to examine more closely how shifts in culture, religious leadership, and demographics influence racial/ethnic minority students who seek to hold religious positions and their decision-making to attend theology schools.

Because racial/ethnic students represent a significant growth area in graduate theological education, we must study the school choice process that informs the decisions of these students to enter the MDiv program. There is a gap in higher education literature regarding racial/ethnic minority students and school choice in graduate theological education. Thus, this study is

interested not so much in why racial/ethnic students choose a particular theology school, but in *how* these students engage the school choice process. How is it that racial/ethnic students decide to enroll in the MDiv program? What does the choice process for this group look like?

Discoveries from an in-depth study of this subpopulation can build needed constructive research and scholarship in higher education, as well as impact institutional praxis in theological schools, seminaries, and divinity schools.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the graduate school choice of U.S. racial/ethnic minorities enrolled in a Master of Divinity degree program. The school choice process will be generally defined by contextual layers as framed in Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice: (1) individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context.

As a result of the current circumstances facing religious leadership in theological schools in the United States, a number of studies have researched issues of vocational choice, meaning-making for young adult college populations, and pathways to ministry (Palmer, 1998; Parks, 2000; Parks, 1986). Among the issues in front of theological schools is decreasing overall enrollment, while at the same time there is a growing percentage of racial/ethnic minorities enrolled. The Center for the Study of Theological Education (CSTE) is currently studying students of all ages who are attending graduate theology school. CSTE's recent research project involved interviewing seminarians on more than 20 campuses to discover how and why they get to seminary and how their vocational goals are shaped once they get there (Wheeler, Miller, Rugert, Blier & Wiginton, 2013). However, the CSTE study and others do not specifically examine racial/ethnic minority student school choice and decision-making regarding theological

school and the specific educational needs for a growing non-White American populous and multi-cultural religious environment. Given the growing non-White population in theological education, coupled with the fact that one predominant growth area in theological education is people of color, it is crucial to fill this gap in research.

Using Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice as a theoretical framework (see Figure 1), this case study will explore the choices of U.S. racial/ethnic students enrolled in a Master of Divinity program. Though Perna's model specifically examines choice as students move from high school to college, her model can serve as a useful framing of choice as students move from undergraduate studies to post-baccalaureate education – specifically, graduate theological education. There will be a deeper exploration of the notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 2007) – one's system of values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions, that include demographic characteristics such as race and gender, as well as capital that is both cultural and social (Perna, 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Habitus can also be linked to one's embedded social and cultural capital and represents a series of internalized dispositions that individuals use to form perceptions, decisions, and choices (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

Given the focus of the study is to develop in-depth understandings of the aims, opinions, and attitudes of racial/ethnic minority students who enroll in the MDiv program, a qualitative research method will be adopted. Qualitative research is most appropriate because it will provide a means to probe the experiences of racial/ethnic minority students and for these students to give voice to the school choice process and their decision-making to enroll in the MDiv program. This study will be limited to minority individuals who identify as African American, Latina/o, Biracial, or Multiracial. There is some evidence that Asian Americans have distinctive different contextual realities, given that the young adult population of Asian Americans is less

than 5 percent in the U.S. and their percentage share of graduate and professional school is nearly 20 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, DOE, 2000). Moreover, racial/ethnic minority students who are not African American or Latina/o represent significantly smaller numbers in the MDiv program.

### **Significance of the Problem**

Research about the motivations of students who choose to pursue vocations in ministry is among a growing body of research. Recent college-choice research does not typically include graduate and professional education, and none specifically discuss student choice for theology school. There is a current lack of information about racial/ethnic minority's school choice processes in graduate higher education generally and in theological education specifically.

Addressing the research questions outlined will add critical knowledge to a growing body of research related to graduate school choice and aid theological schools in understanding more fully the factors that attribute to racial/ethnic minorities decision-making related to enrollment in theology school. Gaining such knowledge enables theological institutions to better prepare for an ever emerging diverse student population.

### **Research Questions**

Examining graduate theology school choice among U.S. racial/ethnic minority students, research questions include:

1. What does the student-choice process look like for racial/ethnic minorities who enroll in a Master of Divinity degree program?
2. How does the student's individual habitus influence a decision to pursue a vocation in ministry and pursue the MDiv degree program?

3. What role does social and cultural capital play in the school choice process of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in the Master of Divinity degree program?

A qualitative study for this project will be employed for a thorough analysis of graduate school choice and the attitudes of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in a MDiv degree program. Data will be gathered from an interview instrument that will be used to interview participants individually, using a semi-structured format. There will be an interview protocol used to facilitate the interview questions, but flexibility will be permitted to allow for other topics that might arise during data collection that illumine issues of student choice processes and habitus.

### **Master of Divinity: Access and Pipeline for Theological Education**

In order to understand the milieu of graduate theological education, there has to be some common definition for what is meant by such study. Theological education is an exercise in intellectual inquiry, and in some cases can also be considered graduate schools of the humanities and social sciences (Banks, 1999; Wheeler & Farley, 1991). Most of these institutions are also professional schools that teach practical skills for the work in the church and society (Kelsey, 1992). Depending on the perspective and the precise program, theological education can resemble a traditional graduate program in the humanities or a professional program like those in law, nursing, or social work (Wiginton, 2008). While there are several master and doctoral level degrees offered through theological education, the focus of this study is on the flagship professional degree – the Master of Divinity.

For this study, graduate theological education will be referenced as theological schools. Other literature may reference the same as graduate schools of theology, seminaries, or divinity schools. These terms can often be used interchangeably. The operating definition of theological

education is considered a niche educational enterprise that attracts individuals interested in ministry, vocations within religious service, or further advanced theological study that could lead to a terminal degree. Most graduate theological institutions are also professional schools that teach practical skills for work in the church and society (Wiginton, 2008).

Theological education, unlike other professional degrees, also has a distinctly religious dimension. Every theological school has a particular religious history, rooted in the commitments of higher education and a distinct faith tradition or religious movement (Wiginton, 2008).

Further, this study refers to those graduate programs that are among institutions that are members of The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) situated within universities or as free-standing graduate schools. ATS is a membership organization of more than 260 graduate schools in the United States and Canada that conduct post-baccalaureate professional and academic degree programs to educate persons for the practice of ministry and for teaching and research in the theological disciplines. The Commission on Accrediting of ATS accredits the schools, approves the degree programs they offer, gathers strategic information from the schools, and explores critical issues in theological education. Of the 260 schools, they represent a diverse constituency including mainline Protestant, evangelical, and Catholic and Orthodox.

Enrollment in the Master of Divinity, the core masters-level degree program in theological education, is currently at a 20 year low. Although there have been modest decreases each year, with already a relatively small population, any decrease can have significant financial impact on theological institutions.

In fall 2010, 8,043 new MDiv candidates matriculated at the Association's 260 member schools as part of the total MDiv student cohort of 31,123 down from 34,442 in 2006. The MDiv cohort represents 43 percent of the total headcount in theological schools (Brown, 2011, p.

34). For the past several years, overall headcount enrollment at ATS member schools has declined each year. There were 74,193 students enrolled at ATS member schools in 2011, down from 79,244 in 2007 (Insights into Religion).

Table 1

*Enrollment Data for MDiv Students in the United States*

<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>New MDiv Enrollees by Headcount</b>	<b>Percentage Difference in Total Headcount</b>	<b>Total Headcount for MDiv</b>	<b>Member Schools of ATS offering MDiv (U.S. Only)</b>
2012-2013	7,799	-0.4%	30,659	200
2011-2012	7,668	-1.3%	30,768	199
2010-2011	8,043	0.1%	31,123	198
2009-2010	8,001	-1.1%	31,096	195
2008-2009	8,009	-2.5%	31,499	195
2007-2008	8,166	-2.4%	32,286	192

*Note:* Enrollment data for MDiv students in the United States. Sources: ATS Data Tables 2007-2008, ATS Data Tables 2008-2009, ATS Data Tables 2009-2010, ATS Data Tables 2010-2011, ATS Data Tables 2011-2012, ATS Data Tables 2012-2013.

Each year there are fewer students entering the MDiv program as demonstrated in Table 1. These statistical realities during the recent fiscal crisis for several member schools have resulted in the need to attract more students and increase enrollment in order to obtain more revenue. According to the credible and established web resource supported by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., Insights into Religion, the number of students seeking the MDiv has slowed as specialized degree programs have accelerated. These include the Master of Arts in Counseling and the Master of Arts in Leadership Studies. Further, seminaries are challenged by megachurches that often will not consider theology school as an option for their ministers or lay

leaders, but instead create their own programs to meet their needs. Moreover, some megachurches have started their own seminaries given their stark criticism that seminaries focus far too much on academics and too little time on the practical skills needed to run congregations (Insights into Religion, n.d.). These seminaries are independent and typically not among ATS accredited theological schools.

If populations were segmented within the particular niche of ATS member schools, there are even greater declines among some groups. For instance, institutions from Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions experienced a decrease in full time equivalency (FTE) enrollment of 6,100 students in 2001 to 5,300 students in 2010. Nevertheless, expenditures for the same group of institutions increased by 6.8 percent during that same period. However, there is slight growth among theological schools that identify themselves as evangelical, rather than mainline.

There are both internal and external complexities that shape the current nature of theological education. Enrollment in graduate theological programs has been flat or declining in terms of head count and FTE for most schools. According to Chris Meinzer (2011), director of finance and administration for ATS, “At the same time, expenditures in theological education have been growing at a rate that is in excess of its higher education peer group” (p. 46). The combination of flat or declining enrollment has put consistent pressure on theological schools to better manage expenditures and find additional revenues (Meinzer, 2011).

Graduate theological education is challenged by an external environment that depends on the church (congregations, non-profit ministries, faith-based social service entities, etc.) that value and benefit from an educated clergy and persons in lay leadership in the church. Mainline Protestant churches in the United States have a severely declining membership in a society that is less religious than in the past and increasingly racially diverse (U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,

2008). The demand for clergy and lay leaders who would typically serve in mainline Protestant denominations has also diminished. However, evangelical Protestant populations have increased within ATS member schools, making up 62 percent of all students (Aleshire, 2012). Further, the number of African American students in evangelical theology schools more than doubled over the last twenty years and enrollment of Latinos/as tripled in the same period in which white student enrollment slowed (Wheeler, Ruger, & Miller, 2013). “Schools of all traditions and types have experienced decline in enrollments of white students, as defined by ATS, and growth in other groups, though rates of white decline vary and different growing racial/ethnic groups are prominent in different religious traditions” (Wheeler, Ruger, & Miller, 2013, p.17).

Current demographics in theological education raises questions about how the growing evangelical landscape in America is interconnected with the growing racial/ethnic minority students attending theology schools. American religiosity is vastly different from the past with an increasing number of individuals who self-identity as unaffiliated and claiming no particular religious affiliation. The growing evangelical presence is also characteristic of American Christian religion and is reflected in the increased number of evangelical theological schools in the country. In 1981-82, 19 percent of member schools of the Association for Theological Schools (ATS) were evangelical Protestant, while in 2011-2012 approximately 40 percent of member schools are evangelical (Aleshire, 2012). One would have to speculate at this point whether the increased evangelical or unaffiliated Protestants in the American religious landscape, and in theological institutions, are related to an increase in minority students who attend seminary.

The data would suggest there are some differences among specific minority groups with half of African American students attending mainline Protestant theology schools, while 80

percent of Asian/Asian North American students and 63 percent of all Latino/a students attend evangelical theology schools (Aleshire, 2012). Further, with the many religious organizations that do not require their clergy to be formally educated, there is a concern that many racial/ethnic minorities do not attend theological school though they have taken on a ministerial vocation. Therefore, it is all the more essential to examine the factors that influence racial/ethnic minorities to attend graduate theology school.

The problem with student recruitment is a multi-faceted one that includes the weakening of mainline denominationalism, a diminished role of clergy in society, fewer employment opportunities for graduates, and growing student debt loads (Ruger, Miller & Maphis, 2005; U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008; Aleshire, 2011). Additionally, the pipeline from undergraduate institutions reflects a shift with growing racial/ethnic populations, as well as fewer students seeking undergraduate degrees in the humanities. In the recent College Choice Report, the four areas of health sciences and technologies (Business, Social Sciences and Law, and Engineering) was selected as the planned major of more than half of all ACT-tested high school students (ACT College Choice Report 2013-2014). Further, approximately half of all students who registered for the ACT ranked the availability of a college major as the most important factor in their school choice process (ACT College Choice Report 2013-2014). While the choice of a planned major for a high school student entering college may not be the only related matter to college choice, it provides some information about students interest and possibly their aspirational vocation – including the pipeline in theological education.

With the relatively new shifts in graduate theological education, institutions are making attempts to adapt. A number of mainline seminaries are cutting faculty, selling property, and eliminating degree offerings (Schmidt, 2011). “Those that are not, are competing for a shrinking

pool of prospective students and rely on scholarships and lower academic standards to attract the students that they do have” (Schmidt, 2011, para. 2). Amid all the change occurring within theological education, the student profile of those attending theology schools has shifted dramatically with more racial/ethnic minority students seeking graduate ministry degrees (Wheeler, 2001; Wheeler, Ruger, Miller, 2013). The current state of theological education provides the opportunity to examine more closely how shifts in culture, religious leadership, undergraduate student choice and pipeline, and demographics impact racial/ethnic minority students who seek to hold religious positions and their decision-making to enroll in the MDiv degree program.

### **Overview of the Study**

This study of graduate theological school choice for racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in the Master of Divinity fills an important gap in the literature. First, it continues research on a conceptual model of graduate school choice that integrates issues of cultural and social capital. Second, it is the only study to examine graduate theological school choice for racial/ethnic minority students.

The second chapter of this proposal provides a literature review. The review of literature is organized in six main categories. First, I review literature related to undergraduate college choice processes. Undergraduate choice models have greatly informed graduate school choice literature. This examination reviews undergraduate choice models ranging from sociological and econometric paradigms to more contemporary integrated models, including Perna’s (2006) conceptual model of student college choice. Second, the review includes literature related to graduate student school choice. Third, there is a specific examination of college choice literature that deals with social capital and the networks that can influence choice process. Similarly, the

fourth area focuses on cultural capital acquisition. Since this study will examine racial/ethnic MDiv students, the fifth section of the review of literature includes demographic characteristics, like race and gender, as a part of the school choice process. Sixth, there is literature related to the idea of habitus and its influence on graduate school choice that is examined. Lastly, Perna's conceptual model of school choice is reviewed in the literature to fully explore the layers of decision-making.

The third chapter of the proposal provides an overview of the methodological approach used in the study. Specifically, the mode of inquiry for the study is qualitative in nature and will be designed to value the narratives of the individuals being studied.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the questions of the *why* and *who* of theological education. Theological education serves communities that depend on relevant, creative, and educated religious leadership in good times and in moments of challenge. Similar to Newtown, human beings and communities suffer tremendous tragedies through significant life moments – the loss of a love one, violence, discoveries of unexpected illnesses, death, or broken relationships – and they depend on skillful religious leadership. As theological education continues to undergo significant changes to serve an ever-changing world, theological schools will need to adapt to the changing demographics that are evident in the U.S. population and now in the hallways of theological schools. More importantly, the voices that emerge from racial/ethnic MDiv students will prove crucial to understanding how the school choice process works with this population. Providing a stage for a study of racial/ethnic MDiv students has the possibilities of informing how theological institutions attract these students for the type of religious leadership that is desperately needed in the world today.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This study examines the graduate theological school choice for racial/ethnic minority students. For the purposes of the study, graduate theological school includes institutions at the post-baccalaureate level and will account for only students enrolled in the Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree program. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the graduate school choice of U.S. racial/ethnic minorities enrolled in an MDiv degree program. Thus, this study will draw significantly from established college choice literature, including sociological and economic integrated models of college choice, human, social, and cultural capital, and the role of habitus in school choice. Much of the related literature stems from undergraduate college choice, but extends to more recent research specific to graduate college choice.

This study will focus specifically on graduate theological students. While there is significant literature on college choice and emerging literature specific to graduate school choice, there is no literature specific to graduate theological school choice. Similarly, much of the early literature provides minimal attention to the particularities or differences of racial/ethnic minority school choice. Given the focus of this study, the literature will also include recent studies that further clarify choice issues for a growing segment in higher education – racial/ethnic minority students. Therefore, the review of the literature will integrate relevant research on college choice broadly, yet also highlight aspects of the research that specifically address racial/ethnic minorities, in order to inform the gap in literature related to graduate theological school choice for this particular group.

The literature provides insight on the research related to college access and choice. In contrast to earlier studies, recent research focuses on the college-choice processes of particular groups, such as African-Americans, Hispanics, and students from a variety of socioeconomic

backgrounds. With the changes to demographics of public high school graduates, many scholars now examine college choice related to the fastest growing racial/ethnic groups (Perna, 2006). The findings and themes in recent empirical studies support this notion. Additionally, much of the literature includes quantitative research that excluded sociological issues in the college choice process. This review offers a synthesis of the literature with recent research concerned with understanding racial/ethnic college-choice processes, as well as research not only focused on economic and sociological approaches to understanding choice, but also integrated models. Understanding the span of decision-making from undergraduate choice processes to graduate school choice processes in the literature, is necessary if there is to be greater examination of the narratives and choice processes of racial/ethnic MDiv students.

### **Undergraduate College Choice Research**

A number of studies examine undergraduate college choice (Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006). Among the most commonly cited model related to college choice is the Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of *predisposition*, *search*, and *choice*. Typically, occurring between 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades in high school, the initial stage outlined in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is *predisposition*. In this stage, students develop aspirations and interest toward attending college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In an exploratory study on college choice that examined the aspirations and perceptions of high school students, Pitre (2006) found that students who held negative perceptions of their high school preparation for college were less likely to aspire to attend college. Specifically, the study examined ninth grade African American and White student's aspirations for college attendance in the predisposition stage of college choice. Using survey data from 241 students from four schools in two suburban school districts in Maryland,

the study found that African American student's aspirations for college enrollment were similar to their white peers, even though African American students had lower levels of academic achievement (Pitre, 2006). Though the study conducted by Pitre (2006) is not designed to be generalized, the study provides evidence that the predisposition of some groups of students is not solely dependent on academic achievement and that findings related to African American student ambitions should be considered with prudence.

The second or *search* stage is when students begin their college search by gathering information about colleges (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), it is at this stage that students determine an initial group of colleges and universities that they will consider applying to and proceed to gather information about the institutions. Students develop preferences among institutions and consider an ability to pay, along with considering criteria for admissions (Choy & Ottinger, 1998). Likewise, students develop expectations and perceptions about the institution (Choy & Ottinger, 1998; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Search typically is during the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, while the third stage, also known as *choice*, occurs in the eleventh and twelfth grades when students select an institution and decide to enroll to a particular college or university (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2006). According to Perna (2006), little is known about the timing of the three-stage model for nontraditional enrollment for those who do not attend college immediately after high school.

Though linear in developmental progression, researchers argue that the Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model occurs within a contextual environment that can influence each stage of the process. For instance, researchers indicate that among the most influential predictors related to a student's enrollment in college are parental influences (Hossler, Schmit,

&Vesper, 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). These parental influences, according to Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999), range from parental support of saving for college and visiting colleges with their child, to parental encouragement through conversation between students and their parents. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) found that factors that influence enrollment decisions include “parental encouragement, financial considerations, the student’s high school academic resources, the student’s educational and occupational aspirations, and, of course, the student’s academic abilities” (p.6). In addition to parental involvement, Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) argue that choice processes are shaped by the availability of information and the cost-benefit of attending college.

Bergerson (2009) contends that choice models, like that used by Hossler and Gallagher’s three-stage model and others, provide researchers with a variety of process points by which to frame college choice research. Though much of the literature related to college choice evolved from Hossler and Gallagher’s comprehensive model (1987), recent studies emerged with an increasingly diverse college-going population (Bergerson, 2009). Additionally, much of the new research that expands and critiques the Hossler and Gallagher model is quantitative, but some researchers argue for the need for qualitative research (Perna, 2006; Bergerson, 2009). Such qualitative data aids in filling the knowledge gap and provide in-depth understandings of how racial/ethnic minority students engage in the college choice process.

### **Sociological and Economic Models of College Choice**

College choice research has been typically represented as either sociological or economic approaches (Paulsen, 1990; St. John, Paulsen, and Starky, 1996; Perna, 2006; Vrontis et al, 2007). These two theoretical perspectives have been dominant in guiding research on college choice. Sociological or status attainment models of college choice places emphasis on socioeconomic

characteristics of student choice. The sociological approaches examine issues related to socioeconomic status and academic preparation and how these issues predispose students to aspire to higher educational attainment (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Earlier scholarship related to sociological status attainment expanded the concept of college choice by focusing on the experiences of students and their life situations (Sewell & Shah, 1968). In their influential research, Sewell and Shah (1968) found that there are a number of factors that inform college choice for students. In their seven-year study of 10,318 Wisconsin high school seniors, they discovered that socioeconomic status, intelligence, and parental encouragement were all a significant part of the college-choice process. Traditional status attainment models (Sewell & Shah, 1968; Sewell, Hauser, & Wolf, 1986) found that students with higher levels of academic achievement and preparation received higher levels of encouragement to attend college, and thus these students had higher aspirations that could then lead to greater educational attainment (Perna, 2006). The early sociological models, like that of Sewell and Shah (1968), are among the earliest contributions to understanding college choice.

More recent research (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Perna, 2000; Lin 2001; Winkle-Wagner, 2010) has expanded on traditional status attainment models and focuses on the ways sociological frameworks of cultural and social capital effect college choice for students. Perna's study (2000) examined the relationship between access to capital and academic preparation among different racial/ethnic groups. The study found that African American and Hispanic students generally have less access to capital than white students. Additionally, Perna found that social and cultural capital played as significant of a role in the likelihood of African American and Hispanic students attending college as academic achievement (Perna, 2000).

In the 1970s and 1980s, research on econometric modeling of the college choice processes, based on human capital theory, was typically used to explore higher education investment decisions (Becker, 1962, 1993; English, 2012). According to Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), the economic approach in studying college-choice process has dominated the literature as researchers have evaluated the effects of public policy on college access. Econometric modeling, unlike sociological approaches, is primarily concerned with exploring the rational cost-benefit in the choice process. For example, Manski and Wise (1983) used the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of high school students to explore student college choice. This quantitative study examined five factors in college choice – academic aptitude, family income, institutional cost and aid, high school quality, and labor market conditions. The results of the Manski and Wise (1983) study reveals that students are more likely to enroll at colleges that exhibit a competitive academic profile and that the low-costs institutions were preferred (Manski & Wise, 1983).

Researchers have consistently found that all students are sensitive to tuition costs. In Heller's (1997) study, he found that with every tuition increase of \$100, there was a corresponding decline in enrollment. Building on the earlier research of Leslie and Brinkman (1988), Heller's (1997) study included a review of 10 tuition enrollment studies between 1975 and 1996. While human capital investment models have been instrumental in focusing on the effects of finances on higher education for students and families, there are limitations with such approaches in understanding differences in college choices across groups (Perna, 2006). Perna (2006) contends that though substantial investment in student financial aid has been made by institutions of higher education, as well as state and federal programs, "college access and choice remain stratified by socioeconomic status (SES) and race/ethnicity" (p.99).

## **Integrated Models of College Choice**

Researchers have used a variety of theoretical approaches, sociological and economic, to examine student college choice. However, Perna (2006) suggest that no single approach is sufficient. Moreover, Perna (2006) contends that in order to understand choice processes across groups, a conceptual model that integrates aspects of sociological and economic approaches is needed. In recent research, attention has been given to understanding different racial groups, and students of low socioeconomic status. In these studies, an increasing number of scholars (Perna 2000; McDonough, 1997; Perna & Titus, 2005) use qualitative methodologies. For instance, Perna's (2006) conceptual model employs an integrated approach because there is an assumption that the individual's behavior related to college choice is shaped by the individual's habitus or their system of values and beliefs that forms an individual's views (Perna, 2006). In an influential study conducted by McDonough (1997), the college choice process of high school students from various socioeconomic levels and cultures was examined related to student perceptions about fit within a higher education environment. Particularly, McDonough explored how individual background characteristics shape habitus, and thus the college choice of participants. Findings revealed that students often excluded themselves from highly competitive or high costs colleges based on their sense of belonging – thus, argues McDonough, contributing to the reproduction of a lower socioeconomic statuses (1997). Additionally, the study examined organizational habitus and the institutional role in reproducing social inequalities (McDonough, 1997).

## **Graduate School Choice**

Graduate-level decision process has been described as complex (Olson & King, 1985). The complexities of graduate student school choice are multidimensional concerns of ability,

income, costs, and return on investment. Though there are several models of the undergraduate college choice process, in the early 1990s, there were no such models that existed for graduate-level decision-making (Stoecker, 1991). The existing literature is limited since there remain a relatively small number of studies that have comprehensively examined the college choice decisions of graduate and professional students. Even a smaller number of studies include findings specific to racial/ethnic graduate student choice issues.

The current literature on graduate school choice explores a number of common independent variables. This review will examine those variables most relevant to Perna's (2006) conceptual model used for college choice processes. Specifically, an examination of variables most closely aligned with the first two layers of Perna's (2006) conceptual model, individual habitus and institutional context, will be used to frame the literature on graduate school choice.

Building on the initial *Baccalaureate and Beyond Study* (1993/94) and the follow-up studies (1997 and 2003), scholars began to more fully explore graduate school choice processes (Heller, 2001; Perna, 2004; Zhang, 2005). Those studies identified graduate school decision-making processes, including the effects of biographical/demographical factors, family background, undergraduate institutional type, undergraduate academic achievement, and costs factors (Judson, 2012). Perna (2004, 2006) argued for the need for a conceptual model that integrated rational human capital investment and sociological notions of cultural and social capital in order to better understand student college choice across different groups. Recent research on student college choice points to the strength of an integrated conceptual model because it does not assume that patterns of educational attainment or advancement are universal but may vary across racial/ethnic and socioeconomic status (Perna, 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Perna (2006) asserts, "A conceptual model that draws on both economic and sociological

perspectives assumes that students' educational decisions are determined, at least in part, by their habitus, or the system of values and beliefs that shapes an individual's views and interpretations" (p.115). In recent years, several researchers (Judson, 2012; English 2012) have adapted or applied Perna's (2006) conceptual model to graduate school choice processes.

### **Habitus: Demographics, Cultural Capital, and Social Capital**

Habitus is a system of dispositions possess by individuals that invoke certain perceptions and appreciation within social reality. Thus, habitus not only includes an individual's biographical and demographical characteristics, but encompasses the totality of dispositions that an individual internalizes and will employ. Habitus is the cumulative collection of dispositions, norm, and tastes that "functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.82). Individual habitus is the first contextual layer used in the theoretical framework for this study. A student's race/ethnicity, gender, and SES have been found to have direct and indirect effects on graduate school choice processes (Perna, 2006). Similarly, the sum total of one's cultural capital, also known as habitus, is a generative practice that influences one's approach and perceptions within the social realm and can influence school choice. While race and ethnicity and other demographics provides context for an individual, habitus is an embodied notion that is not fully contained in categories of race and ethnicity. Rather, habitus is formed, exists, and acts out of particular structures. Bourdieu (1977) asserts, "the structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristics of a class condition) produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions..." (p. 72). He further contends that habitus or one's system of dispositions results from an organizing action or structure; forming dispositions, norms, tastes, preferences, that become a way of being or habitual state that becomes embodied.

Habitus typically functions below the level of consciousness of language (Bourdieu, 1977; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Because habitus is an embodied class it appears natural and highly individualized, but it is also integrally linked to material and economic conditions that can work to propagate and reinforce social stratification (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Thus, Bourdieu's (1977) theoretical structure has to do with structure and individual agency. According to Winkle-Wagner (2010), "implied in Bourdieu's work is the idea that one's agency or the actions one sees as available are somehow limited because of and through one's tacit, unconscious acceptance of the existing stratification in the structure" (p.17). In higher education, the interaction between structure and individual agency can be explored. This is especially significant in examining the ways that structure influences agency and vice versa in racial/ethnic student populations, and to what extent is school choice really *a choice* for certain agents in lower social hierarchies.

Similar to undergraduate college choice literature, within the graduate school choice literature there are also two major categories for which the literature resides: (1) economic models that focus on demographic, economic and social factors, and (2) sociological models that focus on individual characteristics and individual choice. A small number of descriptive studies (Gropper & Fitzpatrick, 1959; Davis, 1964; Baird, 1976; Malaney & Isaac, 1988) have been conducted over the last 50 years that indicate that costs, financial aid, field of study, and background characteristics all are important factors that uniquely influence the decision to attend graduate school. However, Ethington and Smart (1986) conducted a study that went beyond descriptive relationships by proposing a causal model of the graduate school choice process. This pivotal research found that there was a direct importance of degree completion, financial aid, undergraduate institutional characteristics, and the student's undergraduate school experiences that influenced the decision to attend graduate school. Further, the results of the Ethington and

Smart (1986) study found other indirect influences, such as background characteristics, had positive effects on the student choice process. While the Ethington and Smart (1986) study segmented findings based on socioeconomic backgrounds and gender, it did not include racial/ethnic group differences in its findings. For instance, the study found that academic integration was more important for men while social integration was more important for women with no distinction made by race or ethnicity (Ethington & Smart, 1986).

There have been only a handful of studies that specifically examined the factors that influence racial/ethnic graduate students' decision to enroll in a graduate program. An example of this type of research includes a recent study Ramirez (2013) conducted. The research is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with a total of 24 Latinos/as who decided to matriculate at a doctorate-granting public research university. The study found that Latinos/as are influenced by many factors in selecting the program, including proximity to home, faculty influences at that institution, financial considerations, campus climate concerns, and circumscribed choices (Ramirez, 2013). The small sample size included respondents who attended the particular institution because it was the only graduate program they had been accepted to – thus, their graduate school choice process is considered circumscribed.

In another recent study by Strayhorn, Williams, Tillman-Kelly and Suddeth (2013), data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study identified factors that historically Black colleges and universities graduates consider when choosing a graduate school. Strayhorn and colleagues found that Black men and women consider the same three factors when making graduate school decisions: reputation of school and faculty, proximity to home or work, and availability of the preferred academic program. However, the study revealed that more Black men (8.3%) than Black women (7.1%) considered tuition and fees when choosing a graduate

school, while more Black women (12.8%) than Black men (2.8%) contemplated access to financial aid in their decision making process (Strayhorn, Williams, Tillman-Kelly & Suddeth, 2013). Yet other studies confirm that financial factors play a significant role in shaping the college choices of Black students at predominantly White institutions and HBCUs (Freeman, 1999).

A number of studies confirm that graduate school choice is a multistage decision process that will differ for younger and older students (Kallio, 1993; Kallio, 1995). Nevertheless, borrowing from what is known about the undergraduate process and the limited number of studies examining graduate school choice, findings indicate that students with greater academic and social integration, higher socioeconomic status, and those with higher academic achievement are more likely to attend graduate school (Malaney & Isaac, 1988; Ethington & Smart, 1986, Kallio, 1993).

The literature of graduate student school choice includes the effects of academic achievement and preparation. Several scholars have argued that college quality and academic preparedness are elements in the formation of human capital. In Zhang's (2005) study, there is a focus on the effect of college quality on educational continuation for college graduates. Zhang (2005) found that college quality was a strong predictor for graduate program enrollment with baccalaureate recipients from high-quality colleges being 16% (private) and 18% (public) more likely to enroll in a graduate program within four to five years after an undergraduate degree. The study is consistent with previous research in this area. Additionally, academic performance is a strong predictor of graduate school attendance (Zhang, 2005). According to Zhang (2005), on average, one unit increase in undergraduate GPA is associated with an approximate 22% increase in the likelihood of matriculating in graduate school. Further, Zhang (2005) findings

suggest that socioeconomic and academic factors work in tandem. Specifically, “the academic and socioeconomically ‘rich’ become richer while the academically and socioeconomically ‘poor’ become poorer despite the massive expansion of higher education in the United States” (Zhang, 2005, p. 336). Thus, graduate and professional education is an integral part of human capital accumulation, often resulting in prestige within a profession, economic rewards, and high social status.

In a study conducted by Stoecker (1991), the decision factors related to graduate-level process are described into two major categories: (1) Intrinsic factors that include the student’s goals and aspirations, and (2) extrinsic factors such as institutional characteristics, financial aid, and the state of the profession. Earlier studies denoted that background characteristics such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status were intrinsic factors that determined the likelihood of attending graduate school. For instance, a study concluded that those who are white, male, and of higher ability and higher socioeconomic status had an increased likelihood to attend graduate school (Malaney, 1987).

Similar to undergraduate college choice literature, the findings of the handful of studies (Malaney & Isaac, 1988; Ethington & Smart, 1986; Kallio, 1993) related to graduate school choice indicate that similar factors influence students in graduate student decisions as in their selection of an undergraduate college (Kallio, 1995). Factors that influence graduate student decisions include the academic reputation of the institution, costs, financial aid, location, and the student’s individual characteristics (Kallio, 1995). According to Kallio (1995), the greatest difference between graduate students and undergraduates is the increased influence of a spouse/partner, family, and employment concerns.

A study based on a 1986 survey of 2,834 students admitted to master's and doctoral programs at the University of Michigan found that similar to undergraduate choice literature, geography and academic environment factors such as program reputation and quality were of most importance (Kallio, 1995).

### **Institutional Contexts: Professional Considerations, Resources, and Support**

School and community context represent the second layer of Perna's (2006) model and includes variables related to undergraduate institution, availability of resources, types of resources, and structural support and barriers. The institutional contexts can provide important insight on human capital accumulation and social capital in the graduate school choice process (Perna, 2004).

A number of studies related to graduate school choice focus on students in a particular field of study. For instance, in a statewide study of physical therapists surveying plans for graduate education and attitudes toward attendance, Stoecker (1991) found that there were five direct variables that influence the decision to attend graduate school for a particular professional group. The direct variables include background characteristics, institutional characteristics, college experiences, work experience, and attitudes of the student. According to Stoecker (1991), the most significant factor in the graduate decision process was the importance of improving clinical/technical skills necessary for the job. Thus, this particular professional group is greatly influenced by vocational considerations and "...a strong occupational link exists between the professional group and graduate study" (Stoecker, 1991, p.696).

In another study, Gagnon and Cocolas (1988) surveyed graduate pharmacy students regarding why they decided to pursue graduate education. Results of the study found that

pharmacy students were motivated toward graduate studies for better career opportunities, intellectual satisfaction, and challenging work (Gagnon & Cocolas, 1988).

Additional studies (McClain, Vance & Wood, 1984; Brown, Conn, Peiser, Robinson & Smith, 1984) examined the choice process of MBA students. A study conducted by McClain, Vance and Wood (1984) examined the records of 485 MBA applicants to Boston University and found the primary factors influencing their decision to attend included opportunities for male/female interactions within the program, distance, quality of the undergraduate college at Boston University, and the amount of financial aid available for the MBA program. In another study, approximately 200 MBA students at the University of Michigan identified that the reputation of the program, likelihood of admission, and the likelihood of finding a good job after completing the program were the primary factors influencing the graduate decision process (Brown, Conn, Peiser, Robinson & Smith, 1984).

Most research on graduate student college choice is limited due to narrowness of scope. The narrowing element is typically as a result of examining graduate students within a particular field of study or prospective profession. According to Kallio (1993), a graduate student's perceptions of an institution are more likely to be based on perceived characteristics of a particular department or program rather than global institutional characteristics.

In a study that examines the progression of undergraduates to doctoral programs from the 32 highly selective, private institutions that comprise the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE), regression results indicate no consistent effect of high debt inhibiting students to progress to graduate studies (Schapiro, O'Malley, & Litten, 1991). In this case, surveys were administered to graduating seniors at COFHE institutions in 1982, 1984, and 1989, resulting in large data sets. The level of debt the students surveyed incurred did not influence,

negatively or positively, the immediate decision to attend graduate school (Schapiro, O'Malley, & Litten, 1991).

On the other hand, Ramirez (2013) asserts that Latino/a students are especially sensitive to issues of costs and financial aid. Further, some scholars (Ramirez, 2013; Perez & McDonough, 2008) argue that financial constraints can be a factor in Latino/a students attending less selective institutions and hamper their degree attainment.

In a study conducted by Kallio (1995), results indicate that similar to undergraduates, financial aid is an important factor graduate student decision-making. While research on undergraduate college choice suggest the strong influence of parental involvement, studies (Olson & King, 1985, Kallio, 1995) have found that importance of spouse/partner and work-related issues are significant influences on graduate student college choice decisions.

Among the few large scale studies crossing disciplines is the Olson and King (1985) study of matriculated graduate students at a particular large institution. The Olson and King (1985) study examined the graduate student school choice process, and analyzed two steps in the decision process: (1) initial consideration of an institution, and (2) decision to enroll. This study found primary factors influencing the initial consideration for attendance at an institution included location, personal contact with faculty, reputation of the academic department, and educational costs (Olson & King, 1985). Factors concerned with the decision to enroll included positive faculty interaction and contact, personal reasons related to marriage/family, spouse educational or employment plans, the student's employment plans, and prior enrollment at the institution (Olson & King, 1985).

In follow-up research to the Olson and King (1985) study, Olson (1992) conducted another study of matriculated graduate students at a large Midwestern state university. Findings

from the follow-up study revealed that influential factors changed as graduate students continue through the decision process. Initially, when potential graduate students began considering the institution, the most important factors were location, cost, academic reputation, personal contact with faculty, and the recommendation from others (Olson, 1992). Near the end of the decision process, the most essential factors included personal and positive contact with university personnel, followed by academic reputation and cost (Olson, 1992). Both the Olson and King (1985) and the later Olson (1992) studies compiled evidence that suggests that graduate choice decisions are more likely to attend an institution that is accessible, friendly, affordable, and perceived to be of high quality.

### **Summary**

There is a generation of literature on college choice that has been essential to understanding college access. Over the past 20 years, the most notable changes are related to the populations being examined (i.e., racial/ethnic minorities), theoretical frameworks, and methodological approaches. While there were typically more distinct disciplinary approaches identified in the earlier literature, there are now multiple frameworks (social and cultural capital) drawn from within these perspectives (Perna, 2006). A further evolution of methodological approaches has resulted in frameworks that include more integrated approaches as well as both sociological and econometric perspectives (English, 2012; Vrontis et al, 2007). Economic approaches to the issue of college choice or rational choice models suggest that students primarily weigh the costs versus benefits and make decisions based on these factors (Bergerson, 2009). However, integrated models further developed to include theories that focus on cultural and social capital in order to explore the nuances associated with the college choice process for those in underrepresented demographics (i.e., low socioeconomic status, racial ethnic minorities,

etc.). Additionally, college-choice research is dominated by quantitative methodological approaches. Thus, qualitative approaches are becoming more essential in understanding the in-depth college choice processes for individuals.

Research into graduate school choice processes is still developing and is quickly becoming a new area for further exploration and knowledge creation. The strong scholarly work established in the undergraduate college choice field continues to provide a foundation for future scholarship for graduate school choice. The conceptual model used by Perna (2006) reflects an integrated approach that has emerged in the area of college choice and can serve as a framework to further examine graduate theological school choice for students enrolled in a Master of Divinity program.

### **Social Capital in the College Choice Process**

Social capital generally focuses on relations between people that provide productive benefits. Though there is no commonly agreed upon definition of social capital, in college choice process literature it often refers to, as Putnam (1995) defines, “the features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p.6). Particularly helpful to understanding social capital in the college choice process are the three forms noted by Coleman (1988): 1) unspoken obligations and expectations between members of the community, 2) information channels between members of the community, and 3) norms between members of the community that shape behavior within the community. Parental involvement, according to Perna and Titus (2005), is a form of social capital because of the relationship between student and parent, as well as other relationships stemming from the parent’s involvement that promote college enrollment (Coleman, 1988; Perna & Titus, 2005).

### **Institutional and Economic Capital**

Recent studies also find that institutional support promotes college enrollment and are considered in the school choice decision-making process (Griffin, del Pilar, McIntosh, & Griffin, 2012; Perna & Titus, 2005; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005). Specifically, institutional support like financial aid or tuition recession is connected to college choice. St. John, Paulsen, and Carter (2005) uses the financial-nexus model, a proven methodology, in order to analyze the effects of costs and aid to students and their impact on college choice. This research is an examination of the financial nexus between college choice and persistence among African Americans and Whites. Using sequential sets of logistic regression analyses of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey of 1987, St. John, Paulsen, and Carter's (2005) findings indicate direct relationships between finances for choosing college and college costs. Whites in the dataset, who chose their colleges with employment possibilities in mind, were more likely to persist. There were higher percentages of Whites whose parents completed master's degrees, completed high school, and were from families from upper-middle- and upper-income brackets (St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005). Findings also indicate that a larger percentage of African Americans were concerned about finances when they made their college choices. Thus, African Americans were more likely to need institutional support (St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005).

In the St. John, Paulsen, and Carter (2005) study that examines the role of the costs of college and student financial aid in promoting enrollment among minority students, it was determined that larger percentages of African Americans chose college because of financial aid offers and low tuition. Further, the study concluded that those African Americans who chose to attend college because of their financial aid offers were approximately 5 percent more likely to persist (St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005).

Institutional support and the type of campus environment are also important in the choice process. Results from one study that surveyed 1,339 incoming freshman at four different universities suggest that perceived psychosocial quality of a campus can affect college choice (Cho & et. al., 2008; Ramirez, 2011). Examining psychosocial, institutional, and personal factors most important to students in choosing a particular college, the study indicated the importance of a secure and welcoming feeling on campus (Cho & et. al., 2008). Additionally, while perceived psychosocial quality of a campus affects college choice substantially, findings determined that racial climate is more important to students in underrepresented groups (Cho & et. al., 2008). For graduate students, it was found that participation in undergraduate research programs and support from institutional agents helps Latinos successfully navigate the graduate school application process and aid to eliminate barriers due to lack of knowledge or cultural capital (Ramirez, 2011). Thus, evidence suggests that sources of institutional support and financial resources can play a more substantial role in college choices among racial/ethnic students, especially among African-American and Latino students.

### **Parental Involvement**

Other findings, however, reveal that African Americans and Hispanics not only possess fewer of the types of capital that promote college enrollment, but they also attend schools with fewer of the resources that promote college enrollment. When examining data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1992 and 1994, Perna and Titus (2005) conducted a study to discover ways parental involvement influences the college enrollment of African Americans and Hispanics. In this study, which includes a sample size of 9,810 students and 1,006 schools, the social capital used as a conceptual framework was parental involvement.

Integrating the work of Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Lin (2001a, 2001b), Perna

and Titus (2005) developed a comprehensive conceptual model in order to understand parental involvement as a form of social capital. Perna and Titus' (2005) research found that African Americans and Hispanics average lower levels of family income, and parental education, than Whites and Asian Americans. The study supports the notion that parental involvement is a means to convey norms and standards. Further, parent interactions with the student, the school, and other parts are associated with a likelihood of enrolling in college (Perna & Titus, 2005). Findings from the Perna and Titus (2005) study indicate that parent-student discussions about education-related matters and parent-initiated contact with the school about volunteering and academics is associated with a greater likelihood that a student will enroll at either a 2-year or a 4-year college. However, parent-initiated contact associated with behavioral problems is associated with a lower likelihood that a student will enroll in college (Perna & Titus, 2005).

### **Social Networks and Social Support**

Social capital frameworks are instrumental in furthering knowledge of how and which resources and networks are crucial in the college choice process for racial/ethnic minority students (Pérez, & McDonough, 2008). One study found that for black immigrant students, culture and embedded expectations shape beliefs about education and decisions about whether to attend college and where to enroll (Griffin, del Pilar, McIntosh, & Griffin, 2012). This qualitative study, though small in scale, delved into issues in order to capture students' cultural, familial, and educational expectations through their own narratives by integrating the Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college-choice model and habitus. These black immigrant college students who attend a large public research university expressed the strong influence that their culture's emphasis on and commitment to education had on their predisposition to attend college (Griffin, et al., 2012). Further, findings revealed a range of socioeconomic status among study

participants. While financial resources were important in the institutional choice phase of the college-choice process, the advice and support of parents was essential to decision-making regardless of costs (Griffin, et al., 2012). The findings suggest that habitus works in such a way that the support network from family is essential to the choice process and that as a result of college attendance, the student provides a means of social mobility not just for the individual, but for the family network (Griffin, et al., 2012).

Social networks and social support is a form of social capital that influences the college choice process. For example, findings from a study reveal that lack of access to social and cultural capital hampers Latinos' graduate school choice opportunities and outcome (Ramirez, 2011). However, regardless of an individual student's social, economic, cultural, and human capital, the likelihood of enrolling in college depends on resources that may be accessed through school social networks (Perna & Titus, 2005). Research indicates that chain migration contacts played influential roles for first generation college students. A study of 105 Latina/o high school juniors and seniors in the greater Los Angeles area found that prospective first-generation college students rely on siblings, relatives, peers, and school counselors for postsecondary planning for college (Pérez & McDonough, 2008). Building on prior research (Ceja, 2001; Gandara, 1993, 1995), Pérez and McDonough (2008) found that Latina/o students not only rely on their family and school staff for college planning resources, but these students rely on extended family members for college information. Additionally, the study found that having contacts who provide valuable information and opportunities within communities or served as informants of particular colleges and universities influenced students in the decision-making process. Based on the results of the study, students relied on informants in order to avoid possible obstacles or challenges like loneliness (Pérez & McDonough, 2008).

## **Cultural Capital Acquisition**

Recent research focuses on ways that cultural and social capital are resources that influence student college choice, especially among racial/ethnic students. Bourdieu (1977) refers to cultural capital as acquisitions that can be appropriated through institutionalized mechanisms of cultural knowledge and behaviors that is reproduced and profited from by those possessing such power. Social capital, on the other hand, focuses on social networks and connections (Morrow, 1999; Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

The notion of cultural capital was developed by Bourdieu in an effort to acknowledge class-based socially relevant skills, abilities, tastes, preferences, and norms that though not explicitly visible, can lead to inequalities that are socially reproduced (Bourdieu, 1984). Further, these cultural activities act as a form of “capital” or resources that include knowledge about education and educational attainment (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu’s work was concerned about cultural resources that function as power and once cultural normative maintains social stratification and inequalities (Bourdieu 1977, 1984). According to Bourdieu (1984), cultural capital is acquired through social origin or family and through education. If acquired through social origin, cultural capital is typically transferred to other generations, thus, perpetuating class privilege. Scholars have argued that it is more difficult to acquire cultural capital only through education (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Accordingly, McDonough (1997) asserts that those with middle and upper socioeconomic status possess valued forms of cultural capital. Moreover, educators often reward students who have acquired cultural capital from his or her family (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

In higher education research, cultural capital has been used as a theoretical construct by scholars to examine how this type of capital influences student college choice and college access

(Perna 2000; Cabrera and La Nasa, 2001; Nora, 2004; McDonough, 1997). Bourdieu (1977; 1986), and others scholars since, have maintained that cultural capital within the field of higher education has a direct role in perpetuation of privilege (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

The literature unveils that cultural capital is a complex notion, but a focus on Bourdieu's initial cultural capital construct is essential to illuminating factors like cultural capital and how it influences college choice. Higher education can further facilitate the acquisition of cultural capital as colleges and universities reward students who possess certain forms of cultural and social capital that is considered highly valued by dominant groups (e.g., private school education, particular cultural competencies, social origin, etc.). Bourdieu's (1977) work asserts that there are privileged forms of cultural capital that maintains class distinctions through education.

### **Parents' Education and Expectations of Child's Education Attainment**

Research shows a positive relationship between socioeconomic status and parents' education, income, and occupation, and students who apply to a four-year college or university (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2001). Specifically, Hamrick and Stage (2004) conducted a study using the base year data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study 1988 (NELS:88) to examine the predisposition of eighth graders attending schools considered to have high minority enrollment (more than 40% non-white enrollment) and low SES levels (more than 50% participation in school lunch program). Findings from the study revealed that parents' educational expectations had the most significant influence on the predisposition toward college of white students (Hamrick & Stage, 2004). Additionally, white female students who came from a higher income family and had at least one parent who attended college had a more positive predisposition toward college. Among African American students, parents' education had a direct and indirect effect on college predisposition. Further, other variables like

community activities and mentor contacts positively influenced African American students' college predisposition (Hamrick & Stage, 2004). The study found that in addition to parental expectations, high grades for all segments of the population studies positively influenced college predisposition (Hamrick & Stage, 2004). However, among Hispanic males, mentoring and involvement in school activities do not affect college predisposition (Hamrick & Stage, 2004).

Parental encouragement and family variables is an important predictor in the predisposition phase of the choice process (Perna & Titus, 2005; Hamrick & Stage, 2004). Likewise, expectations from peers, teachers, and counselors also influence student college choice aspirations. Perna and Titus (2005) concluded that regardless of an individual student's social, economic, cultural, and human capital, the likelihood of enrolling in college depends on resources that may be accessed through networks. Students who attend high schools where most or all of their friends plan to attend a 2-year college are more likely to enroll in a similar institution. On the other hand, students who attend high schools where, on average, students report that most or all of their friends plan to attend a 4-year college are more likely to enroll in a 4-year college regardless of their friends' plans (Perna & Titus, 2005).

### **Perceptions and Values about Higher Education**

Student's perceptions about a college or university matter in the college choice process. Confer and Mamiseishvili's (2012) findings were consistent with the other research that found that students' perceptions about the institution and its extracurricular activities, recreational facilities, academic facilities, the availability of majors, and the academic reputation mattered when they made their enrollment decisions (Braddock & Hus, 2006; Sevier, 1992; Teranishi et al., 2004). Similarly, Pitre (2006) showed that students with negative perceptions of how well their high school prepared them for college were less likely to aspire to college. In that same

study, African American student's academic achievement was significantly lower than their white peers. Examining the first stage of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) college choice model, Pitre (2006) noted that African American students had similar aspirations of college attendance, but their propensity to attend college was not matched by the type of academic achievement that typically leads to college enrollment.

Perceived academic rigor or academic quality of colleges or universities is among the influential factors in the college choice process. A study of incoming freshmen found that in addition to psychosocial factors, academic quality of the college was the most influential for first-generation students compared to their non-first-generation peers. Further, findings confirmed that regardless of first-generation status, gender, or race, all students rated academic quality as the top influence in their college choice process (Cho & et. al., 2008). However, an even more recent quantitative study of academically talented junior and senior high school students found that only 34.3 percent of colleges were chosen based on perceived prestige (Wilson & Adelson, 2012). Students in AP (Advanced Placement) courses were more likely to choose colleges close to home, where students enrolled in IB (International Baccalaureate) courses were more likely to choose colleges primarily because of availability of scholarships (Wilson & Adelson, 2012). Additionally, the study revealed that students with high standardized test scores and grades had low levels of perceived difficulty with the curriculum and high educational aspirations. These same students, however, chose colleges where the mean SAT score of applicants was much lower than their actual scores (Wilson & Adelson, 2012).

### **Funds of Knowledge**

The lack of knowledge or cultural capital and/or social capital can be detrimental to the college-going process. Ramirez (2011) indicated that the lack of guidance and institutional

support, and institutional abuse by faculty advisors who give improper guidance, are barriers in the college application process specifically for Latinos. On the other hand, research conducted found that sources of support for potential Latino graduate students include undergraduate research programs that provide Latinos with access to social and cultural capital as well as formal and informal support from institutional agents (Ramirez, 2011). Findings from this study reveal that Latinos encounter a number of barriers and sources of support as they navigate through the graduate school application process. Noted obstacles include a lack of knowledge concerning graduate school admissions. These findings are consistent with the existing college choice literature, which has typically found that lack of information concerning college admissions limits the decisions of low-income and racial/ethnic minority high school students (González et al., 2003; McDonough, 1997).

In her qualitative case study, Kiyama (2010) examines how *funds of knowledge* in Mexican Americans families influence education. Citing Moll, Amant, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992), Kiyama defines *funds of knowledge* in the study as the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p.133). Kiyama (2010) studied lower to lower-middle class Mexican American English-speaking families who already indicated positive educational aspirations for their children by participating in an outreach program designed for parents who wanted to discuss issues of college access (Kiyama, 2010). Findings revealed that these parents, while anticipating that their children would attend college, were often slowed by lack of knowledge about financial assistance (Kiyama, 2010). While the study does not conclude with findings about the direct effects on students, it extends the literature related to the importance of parental knowledge and expectations and the influence of educational ideologies on communities

of people. Thus, parental expectations, social networks, and knowledge are crucial forms of social and cultural capital that positively influence college school choice.

### **Demographic Characteristics in Structural and Social Contexts**

There is a growing body of literature that focuses on cultural and social capital in order to explore the nuances associated with the college choice process for those in underrepresented demographics (i.e., low socioeconomic status, racial ethnic minorities, etc.). Research on undergraduate and post-baccalaureate across racial/ethnic groups has suggested there are differences in racial/ethnic groups' enrollment in higher education. Findings indicate that the same qualities that benefit Whites appear not to translate into increased 4-year school attendance for Hispanics. One study indicated that a White student and a Hispanic student from identical backgrounds and with the same academic history are not equally likely to attend a 4-year school (O'Connor & et. al., 2010). The findings indicated that this is the case mainly due to geographic location in a rural school district, and parents who did not save money for college (O'Connor & et. al., 2010). Another study measured the influence of background traits, academic preparation for college, and sociocultural capital on academic achievement in college, as determined by undergraduate grade point average. Using nationally representative samples of African American and Latino male college students, Strayhorn's (2010) research found that there was a significant difference on measures of social and cultural capital for African American males compared to Latino males. This important study challenges normative assumptions of sameness of racial/ethnic minority groups. Specifically, Strayhorn's (2010) study revealed that the most significant predictor of achievement in college for Latino males was academic preparation. However, for African American males socioeconomic status was the most significant predictor of achievement in college (Strayhorn, 2010). African Americans males from higher SES

backgrounds tended to have higher grades in college compared to their same-race male peers from low-SES backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2010).

The literature includes a number of critiques of Hossler and Gallagher's model. While there are a number of studies (Paulsen & St. John, 2002) that has expanded the understanding of college choice outlined in Hossler and Gallagher's model, the literature also includes a body of research (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2006) that questions the applicability of such a model for racial/ethnic minority students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. For instance, Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) conducted a study comparing high school student's ability to complete three basic tasks that are essential to college enrollment: academic qualifications, high school graduation, and completion of admissions materials for college. Findings from the study showed that there were significant differences between students based on their socioeconomic status (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001). This study points to a model of college choice that includes consideration to the specific choice processes for racial/ethnic minority students and those with lower socioeconomic status.

Perna's conceptual model of school choice moves away from the Hossler and Gallagher's model, recognizing the complexity of the choice process and the various influences on students' college choice. Included in Perna's model is serious focus on individual habitus that includes the student's background characteristics such as race, ethnicity, social class, and various forms of social and cultural capital (Bergerson, 2009). Other emerging models of college choice include Tierney and Venegas's cultural framework model (2009).

### **Perna's Conceptual Model of School Choice**

Several studies challenge the linear structure of the Hossler and Gallagher's model and posit that decision making patterns are not linear, but highly complex (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000;

Perna, 2006; Tierney & Venegas, 2009). Specifically, Perna's (2006) conceptual model offers a multi-layered approach for college choice that includes social, economic, and contexts.

Examining the decision-making process of students enrolled in the MDiv program requires a framework that ultimately enhances understanding of graduate theological education student choice. For decades research has explored why high school students choose to attend or not to attend postsecondary institutions. However, the literature on school choice seldom includes graduate or professional education. Further, the typical phases for student college choice of the past – predisposition, search, and choice – is limiting and not as applicable to nontraditional college students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Though the typical phases of student college choice have not been used to examine graduate student populations, this research will employ a new lens to the exploration of theological education.

Using Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice (see Figure 1), this dissertation will explore the choices of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in the MDiv program. Though her model specifically examines choice as students move from high school to college, her model can serve as a useful framing of choice as students move from undergraduate studies to post-baccalaureate education – specifically, graduate theological education. The broader elements of the conceptual model may be useful for examining nontraditional student choice (Perna, 2006). In her work Perna suggests that with this model of college choice, there are potentially parallel processes for students moving from undergraduate studies to graduate or professional education (Perna, 2004; Perna, 2006). Thus, the conceptual model will serve as the essential framework for the analysis of this study.

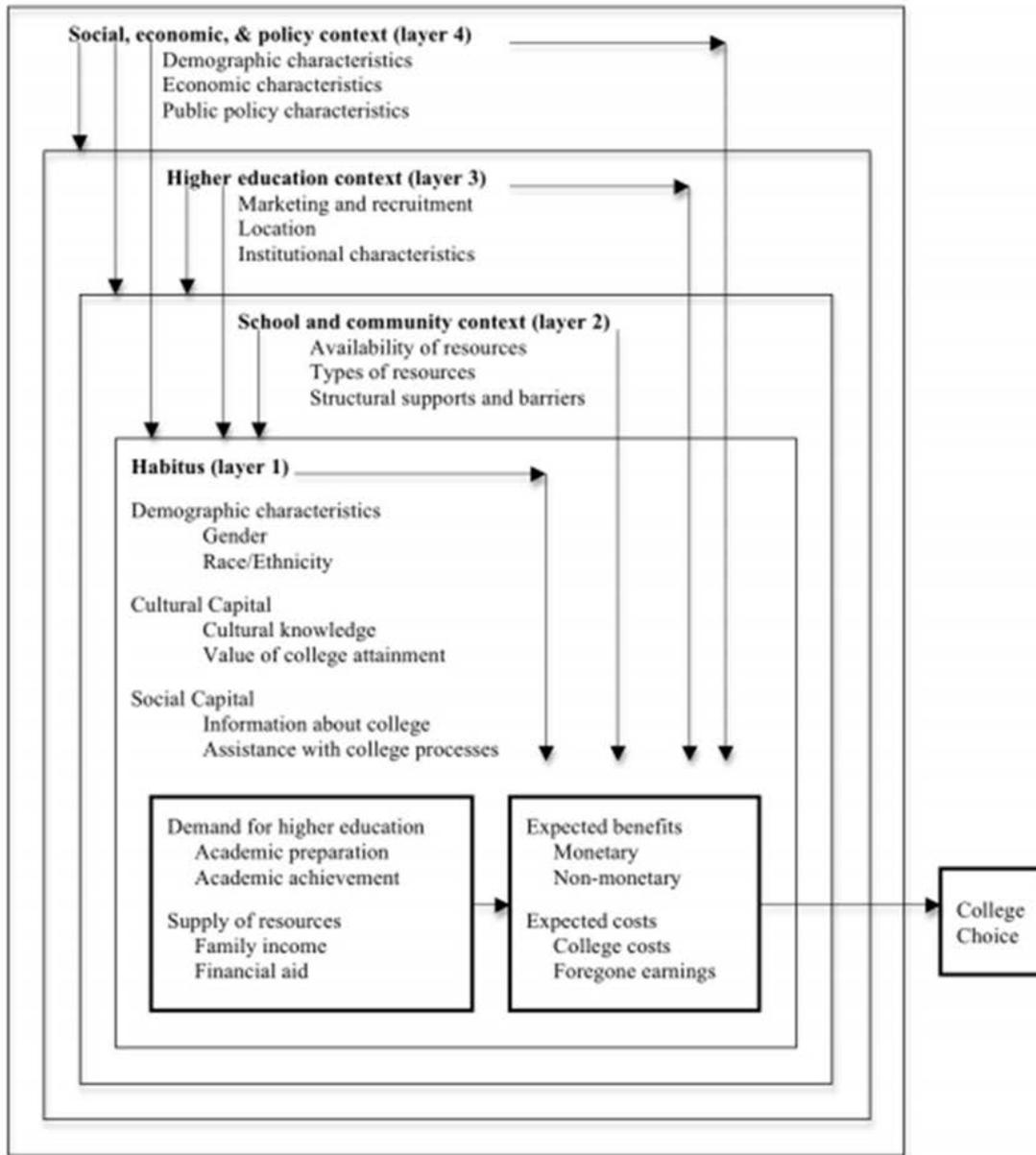
Perna's conceptual model contends that college choice decisions are formed by four contextual layers: (1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher

education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context (2006). For the purposes of this study, the primary focus will be on the notion of habitus – one’s system of values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions that include demographic characteristics such as race and gender as well as capital that is both cultural and social (Perna, 2006; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Additionally, school and community context or the “organizational habitus” (McDonough, 2007) outlined as layer 2 in Perna’s (2006) conceptual model will be included as an essential lens in understanding the choice process of the population being studied. Bourdieu (1977) describes the habitus as the “generative principle of regulated improvisations” that can only be accounted for by relating the objective structure that encapsulates the condition to the conjuncture that represents the particular state of the structure. In other words, Bourdieu was concerned with the nuances of one’s agency as an individual with social structures that reproduce inequality (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, habitus is linked to one’s embedded social and cultural capital and represents a series of internalized dispositions that one will use to form perceptions, decisions, and choices (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Bourdieu (1977) argued that social and cultural capital is all the more essential to those with low economic capital and those historically disadvantaged.

The second layer, school and community context, relates to the availability of resources, types of resources, and structural supports and barriers present within the specific school and community (Perna, 2006). This layer recognizes that social structures and resources can facilitate choice for students (Perna, 2006). Higher education context is the third layer and pertains to institutional characteristics, and marketing efforts and recruitment. This layer of the model recognizes the role higher education institutions play in influencing student college choice. The last layer, the social, economic, and policy context, confirms that student college choice is also shaped by changes in social forces and public policies.

Ultimately, Perna's model is based on the comparison of the benefits of college enrollment versus the cost of enrollment, but the model is not just influenced by the supply and demand or one's ability to pay (Perna, 2006). This integrated model is also influenced by an individual's habitus, by school and community, the higher education context, and social, economic, and policy context (Perna, 2006). The conceptual model provides the opportunity to examine more closely issues of school choice in graduate theological education. This approach provides usefulness for understanding sources of differences across groups that other models are limited in (Perna, 2006). The integration of economic and sociological approaches to understanding student choice is compelling and will serve as an excellent theoretical source for this research.

Figure 1. Perna's Conceptual Model of Student College Choice.



Note. Adapted from "Studying College Access and Choice: A Proposed Conceptual Model," by L.W. Perna (2006) in J.C. Smart (ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, Vol. 21 p.117. Copyright 2006 by Springer.

## **Summary**

The review of literature reveals directions for future study. The body of literature examined provides foundational information that informs choice process and is instrumental in considering choice decisions of graduate theology students. This study will expand on the emergence of new models, particularly Perna's conceptual model, in order to explore how racial/ethnic minority students engage in the process of deciding to go to theology school.

## **CHAPTER 3: DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODS**

In this chapter I outline the methodology that is used to understand graduate theology school choice among racial/ethnic students in a MDiv program. First, I summarize the purpose of the study and provide a rationale for using a qualitative design. Secondly, I detail the methodological approach used in the study: individual interviews. I then discuss the site selection and describe the participants. Next, I outline plans for data analysis, followed by a discussion on issues of validity and trustworthiness related to my research design.

### **Purpose of the Study and Rationale**

The primary purpose of this qualitative study is to understand the graduate theology school choice process for racial/ethnic students enrolled in an MDiv program. Several studies have explored issues of vocational choice, meaning-making for young adult college populations, and pathways to ministry; none specifically examine racial/ethnic minority student school choice and decision-making regarding graduate theological education or the specific educational needs for a growing multi-racial and multicultural religious environment. The aim of the study is to fulfill this crucial scholarship gap in theological education. Specifically, the goal is to further discover how the school choice process takes shape for racial/ethnic students enrolled in the MDiv program. Guided by Perna's (2006) conceptual model for student school choice, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What does the student-choice process look like for racial/ethnic minorities who enroll in a Master of Divinity degree program?
2. How does the student's individual habitus influence a decision to pursue a vocation in ministry and pursue the MDiv degree program?

3. What role does social and cultural capital play in the school choice process of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in the Master of Divinity degree program?

Further, a four-layer graduate school choice conceptual model adapted from Perna's (2006) model in Figure 2 is briefly explored to be responsive to the particular characteristics of graduate and professional education (Judson, 2012). The Perna's model in Figure 1 and the adaptation of Perna's model for graduate school choice in Figure 2 are used as a starting point in analyzing the data, and is useful in framing the layered context by which graduate theology school choice occurs.

Qualitative research is most appropriate mode of inquiry for this research study because of the possible genres that value giving voice to the people or persons being studied. It was determined that a qualitative method constituted the best approach to uncover the factors that influence school choice among racial/ethnic minority students who enroll in the MDiv program. The focus of this study is to develop in-depth understandings of the aims, opinions, and attitudes of a particular segment of students who enroll in a particular MDiv program. Further, the encouragement for more qualitative studies is strong given the dominance of quantitative studies using large-scale national database in college choice research (Perna, 2006). Since a quantitative approach cannot reveal the complexity of an individual's habitus, for instance, in school choice, a qualitative approach is more appropriate.

Using individual interviews, this study examines the graduate theology choice process for racial/ethnic minority in an MDiv degree program. Thus, this study focuses on understanding the narratives of select racial/ethnic MDiv students enrolled at a small, ecumenical, university-related graduate theology school in the United States. I approach this study with the methodological goal of examining the narratives of individuals who are participants in a bound

system – that of the Master of Divinity degree program at a particular graduate theology school.

### **Data Collection**

Interviews were selected as the primary source of data for this study. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to approximately one hour and were conducted in a semi-structured format. The interviews engaged participants individually to allow for more personal and candid responses (Creswell, 1998). The interviews sought to discover more about the participant's habitus (layer 1) as outlined in the conceptual framework for the study. In addition to race and ethnicity, the interviews unveiled more about the student's social and cultural capital. The interview guide outlined in Appendix A provided structure, but there was flexibility to gain the most knowledge about each participant (Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The general interview guide consists of a set of questions for which all interviewees were responsive. This aided in ensuring there was a systematic approach, yet provided space for a conversational and situational interview (Patton, 2002).

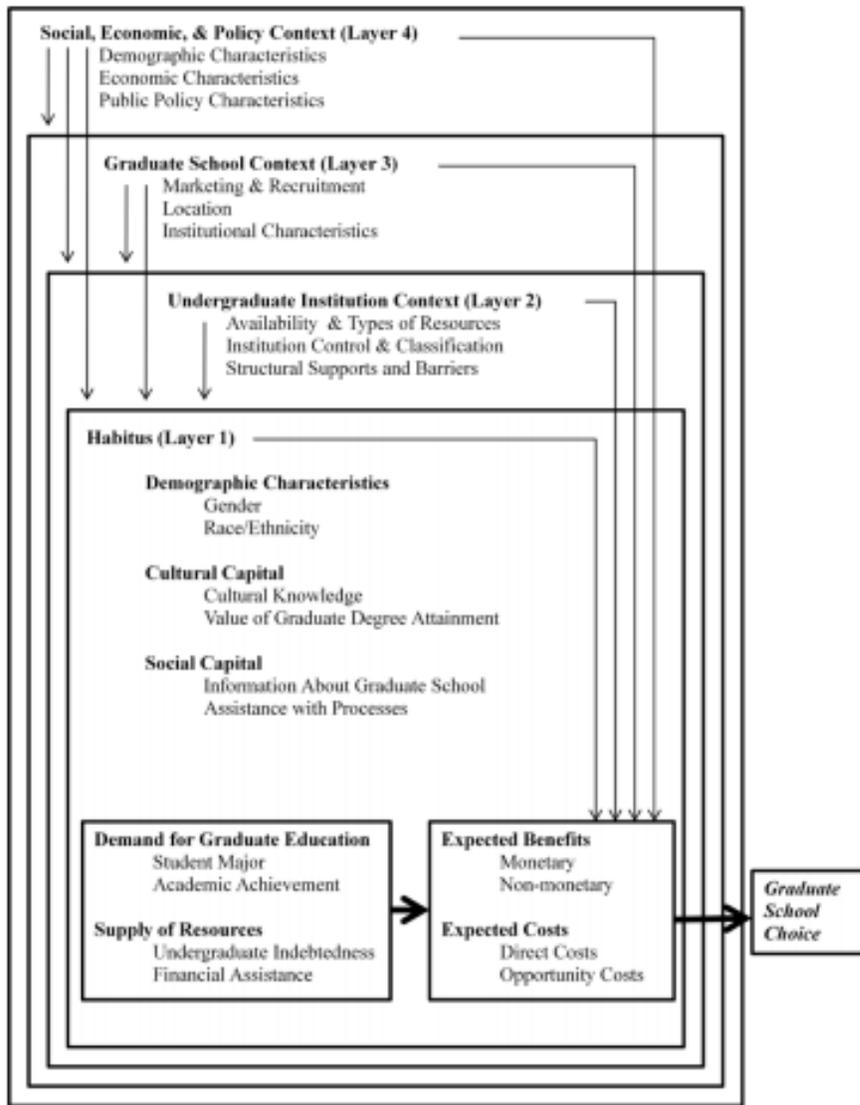


Figure 2. Four-layer graduate school choice model

Yet, open-ended questioning that was also flexibly worded allowed individual respondents to define and articulate their world in unique ways (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) indicates,

Usually, specific information is desired from all the respondents, in which case there is a more structured section to the interview. But the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time. This format allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to the new ideas on the topic. (p.90)

Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via telephone, depending on the preferences and availability of the participants. Since I was the primary instrument of data collection, I was able to probe as necessary and make adjustments in interviewing as needed. The interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The participants were purposefully selected and asked to provide details related to their graduate theological education and undergraduate context. The interviews sought to discover more about the factors that influenced the participant's graduate theology school choice. Beyond matters of race and ethnicity, the interviews were designed to reveal more about the student's perceptions about theological education and their notions about the profession. Among the research tools was an interview guide used to facilitate the interview questions, but flexibility was permitted to allow for other topics that might arise during the interview. In developing the interview guide, I outlined the ultimate goal of the study: to document the factors, influences, and variables of the graduate school choice process for African American, Latino/a, biracial, and multiracial students enrolled in the MDiv program. The interview guide or topical approach provided structure, but also flexibility to gain the most knowledge about each participant (Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

To conduct this study I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Alabama. Additionally, I sought IRB approval at the site of the study. In accordance with the institution in which the study was conducted, their Institutional Review Board policy on Cooperative and Cross-campus research determined that since the institution was not engaged in this research that no IRB approval was required. All participants reviewed and signed consent forms as required by the University of Alabama. The forms explicitly stated that the participants' anonymity were preserved, that they were able to discontinue their

participation at any point, and that they were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and modify them as well. This statement of consent was an essential part of the interview process ensuring that the study was conducted ethically (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The interviews were conducted between November – December 2013.

The research design and qualitative methodology selected for this study provided useful data about the graduate choice process experienced by racial/ethnic minority students in an MDiv program and provided a means by which these student's stories are expressed.

### **Site Selection and Population Strategy**

The population for this study will include U.S. racial/ethnic MDiv students at an ATS accredited institution. The researcher selected a single site study to be conducted at a top 23 national private university located in the Southeast. For the purposes of this study, a pseudonym is used to identify the site of the study – Fischer University School of Divinity. Additionally, other graduate theology schools mentioned by participants in the study were assigned a pseudonym as well. Though the university's core mission is centered on a small liberal arts college model, it has the resources, breath, and global relevancy of a leading research university. This particular site was primarily selected because of my employment at the site. Not only am I familiar with the setting, but will easily have access to participants. Additionally, the site is representative of many ecumenical university-related theology schools' demographic characteristics in terms of sex, race, denominational mix, and MDiv student body size. The population spanned all years of the MDiv program, including first-year, second-year, and third-year racial/ethnic students enrolled in the MDiv at an ecumenical, university-related theology school where the student body is 42% racial/ethnic minority. The rationale in selecting racial/ethnic students spanning the program length includes adding voices that range from being

closer to their choice processes to those who have the capacity to continue to reflect on their decision-making process and connect choice processes with future professional aspirations. Also, there is a practical element of having a large enough sample size to establish data.

The focus of the study was on the individual's habitus and the school/community contexts for which they have access to information, resources, and other forms of capital. Racial/ethnic minority students includes only African American, Latino/a, Biracial, and Multiracial individuals from a single site. As the researcher, I made direct contact with students to request their participation in the interviews. The targeted number of interviews was thirty MDiv students who are U.S. racial/ethnic minorities at Fischer University School of Divinity. However, twenty-seven students were ultimately interviewed for the study. Throughout this dissertation, MDiv students are identified by pseudonyms. Contact information and interview transcripts were maintained to ensure anonymity and privacy.

### **Data Analysis**

The focus of data analysis was on the student's narratives and how they articulate the factors that influence their decision-making and school choice for theology school. Through in-depth interviews, themes and groupings emerged that were responsive to the research questions and informed the overall narratives of these racial/ethnic minorities enrolled in the Master of Divinity degree program.

A number of major works on qualitative methods were researched for guidance on data collection and analyses (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Patton, 2002). After reviewing several interview methods, narrative inquiry was the most promising. Narrative inquiry, an interdisciplinary method, was used to ensure that the participant's stories are provided primacy (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). It is noted that "narrative inquiry seeks to

understand sociological questions about groups, communities, and contexts through individuals' lived experience" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p.153).

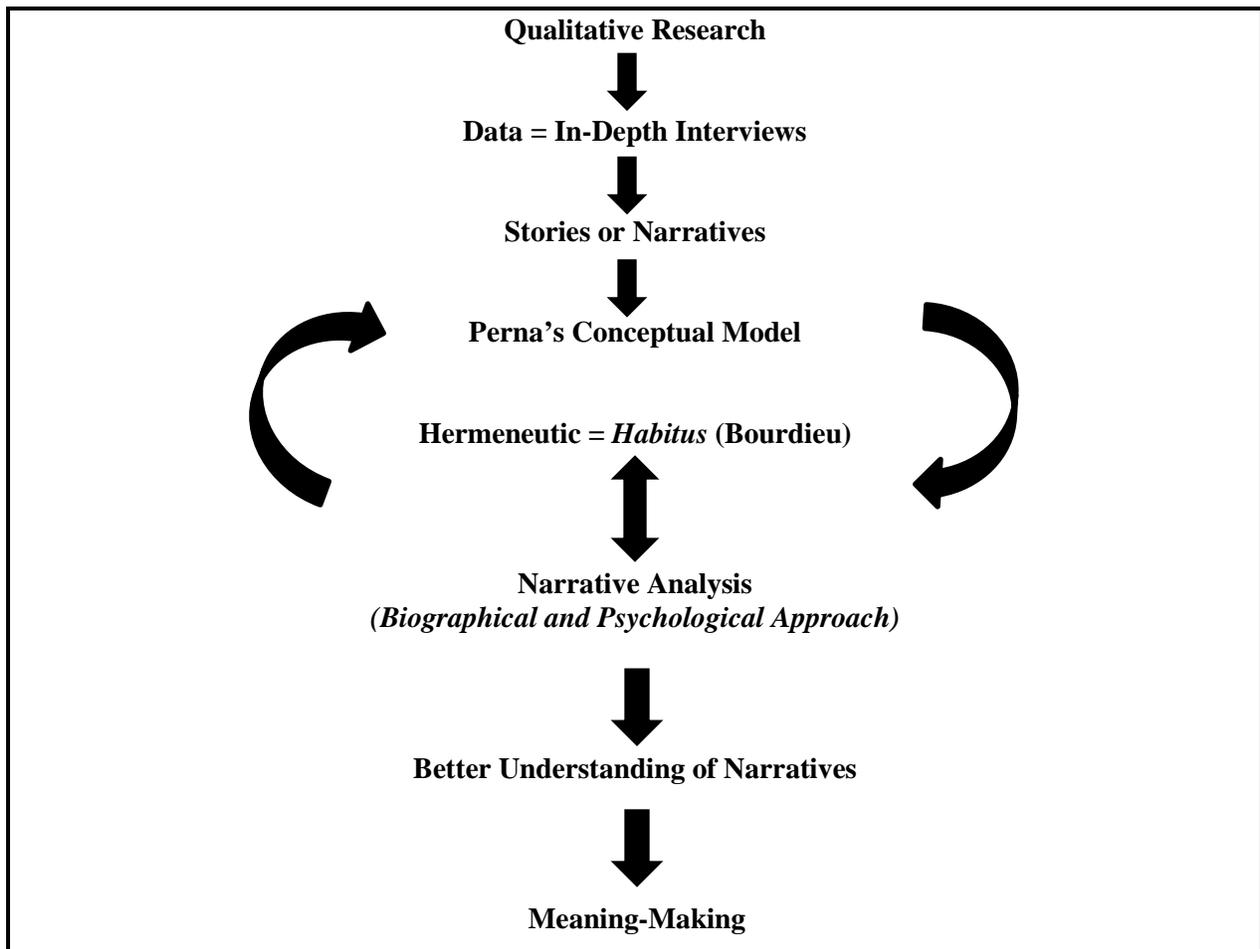
As a critical genre, narrative analysis is used as a research technique as it seeks to describe the meaning of experiences for those who are economically and socially marginalized due to limited social or cultural capital. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), narrative inquiry focuses on four different directions for analyzing first-person accounts of experiences: inward, outward, backward, and forward. Inward refers to internal conditions such as feelings, beliefs, and values. Outward refers to the environment such as structures, experiences, and conditions. Backward and forward refer to past, present, and future time. These four angles guided this narrative inquiry, permitting the focus to be on individual habitus as it relates to graduate theology school choice.

There are a number of approaches that are accessible in order to analyze stories or narratives. The most common approaches include biographical, psychological, and linguistic (Merriam, 2009). Because this study is concerned about factors like race/ethnicity, family origin, life events, and persons of influence in the participant's life, a biographical approach to narrative analysis is highlighted. Similarly, the study is interested in learning more about the thoughts and motivations of participants, including their contextual knowledge, the psychological aspect of these stories is also essential in analyzing the narratives of participants. Thus, a philosophy of hermeneutics was employed to provide a specific interpretive lens that encompasses both the biological and psychological. According to Merriam (2009), it is the philosophy of hermeneutics or the study of written texts that is often cited as informing narrative analysis. Further, Patton (2002) states that "hermeneutics offers a perspective for interpreting legends, stories, and other texts...to make sense of and interpret a text, it is important to know what the author wanted to

communicate, to understand intended meanings, and to place documents in a historical and cultural context” (p. 114). Though hermeneutics has to do with text interpretation, especially biblical texts or wisdom literature, “narrative analysis extends the idea of text to include in-depth interview transcripts...”(Merriam, 2009, p.33). For the purposes of this study, the hermeneutic or interpreting lens is that of *habitus* as outline in Perna’s (2006) first contextual layer. In other words, to better understand the participant’s narratives in the context of graduate theology school choice, Perna’s conceptual model (and specifically Bourdieu’s notions of habitus) is used as a theoretical frame, and narrative inquiry is used as a research technique in order to engage in sense-making or meaning-making of the data.

Table 2

*Research Methodologies to be Used in Dissertation Study*



To facilitate with data analysis, a contact summary sheet was used for each interview that gathered the major themes and issues that arose (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Appropriate coding and grouping of themes resulted from the data. The audio recordings of interviews were given to a transcriptionist to be transcribed. For the data analysis phase of the study, all the data was brought together into an organized study database – interview logs, transcripts, reports, records, reflective memos, other documents (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2008). After gathering the transcripts from the third-party transcriptionist and comparing the written transcripts with the audio recordings, Perna's (2006) conceptual model was used to further understand how respondents' graduate theology school choice process takes shape.

Throughout data analysis, I reviewed and compared data collected from the interviews to manually identify common themes. Informed by Perna's (2006) conceptual model and the literature in the area of college and graduate school choice, the collected data was mapped out in a matrix of findings to clearly highlight themes. Within the matrix of findings, I created coded data categories and subcategories that were conceptually congruent with the research and focused on responding to the research questions.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

While the study analyses the stories of racial/ethnic minorities, it lacks a comparative group of White students. Given the review of literature and what is known about graduate theological school choice, this study privileges the stories of the racial/ethnic MDiv students in a way that does not require a comparison of White MDiv students. Additionally, the particular theological school selected to participate could impact the data. For instance, selecting an

ecumenical, university-related theological school could yield different results than a theological school that is a denominational free-standing institution.

As a practitioner in graduate theological education and an active participant in the profession of ministry, I was able to conduct research in this area with some base knowledge of the setting and activities while at the same time seeking to gain new knowledge given the changing demographics and emphasis in graduate theological education. Namely, there has been shifting emphasis in theological education that focuses on vocation and contextual learning. Ultimately, my positionality afforded me the ability to interact closely with those being studied (Merriam, 2009). On the other hand, as the researcher I am attentive to matters related to response bias. There are two matters that must be noted as a possible limitation in the study: 1) As the senior administrator who admitted all study participants to the MDiv program, my role could have an effect on data collection, and 2) As a person of color interviewing racial/ethnic minority participants, responses from participants could be influenced resulting in a range of comfort levels. Both my position and role, as well as my own identify as an African American woman could have some effect on data collection.

### **Validity**

Validity is relative. In the case of this qualitative research, in which human beings were the instrument of data collection and analysis, internal validity aids in a more reliable and comprehensive interpretation of the data. Specifically the use of multiple theoretical lenses to approach the data, a strategy known as triangulation, confirms emerging findings (Merriam, 2009). This study not only uses Perna's (2006) conceptual framework as a theoretical frame, but also magnifies Bourdieu's work related to habitus, and engages robustly in narrative analyses as a theoretical lens to interpret the stories of participants.

Individual interviews were used to collect data for the study. Interviews were captured on a digital recorder to ensure accurate documentation of the participant's responses and to ensure validity of the data collection process. Each participant was provided the opportunity to view and comment on the transcription from their own interview so additional comments or edits could be accounted for in the data collection process. While triangulation is the most common strategy to ensure validity and reliability, this study also used respondent validation or member checks to not only ensure accuracy of the data, but to also solicit feedback on the emerging findings (Merriam, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This strategy should eliminate the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants have shared and help to identify my own biases in interpreting what is going on (Merriam, 2009).

As a qualitative researcher, there is an operating assumption that reality is ever-changing and dynamic in nature. Though research findings may be congruent with reality from the perspective unique to the context and research raised in the study, I do not intend for this qualitative research to produce replicable data. As such, my research is not necessarily meant to be generalized to other populations or necessarily other divinity schools. Rather, the intention is to highlight the racial/ethnic student choice processes in an MDiv program and to start the conversation about the meaning of their decision-making process.

### **Summary**

This chapter provides a rationale for using a qualitative research method to discover the factors that influence graduate school choice for racial/ethnic students who are pursuing the MDiv. Ultimately, qualitative methods allows for the use of narrative inquiry as an analytical tool so that the participant's stories take center stage; responding to the need for particular, rather than universal, claims about graduate theology school choice to emerge for racial/ethnic students.

Through individual interviews with racial/ethnic minority students, the study discovers more about the choice process of these students. The method of triangulation and response validation enhances the validity of the study. The research methods outlined in this chapter were designed to be responsive to the research questions and also contribute to the current literature that is void of knowledge about the graduate theology school choice process for racial/ethnic MDiv students.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Does anyone ever choose divinity school? I feel like divinity school chooses you. I felt really comfortable, especially starting at the altar as an acolyte – it's my favorite place to be. I almost memorized the priest part sometimes, and I so enjoyed serving with the priest at the altar. I felt God calling me as a teenager to the priesthood, and I really just didn't really want to go though. (Minerva, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv)

This chapter presents the results from this study. For racial/ethnic minority students the path to the Master of Divinity (MDiv) program varies. There are various, and sometimes complex reasons that these students embark on an educational and vocation trajectory that are often marred with uncertainty, limitations, and shortcomings. Yet, the journey is accompanied with faith, a sense of hope, and anticipation. Thus, understanding more about the embodied habitus of racial/ethnic minority MDiv students, both individual agency and integrally linked structural conditions, offer insight into this matter. Specifically, understanding the span of decision-making from undergraduate choice processes to graduate school choice processes is necessary if there is to be greater examination of the narratives and choice processes of racial/ethnic MDiv students. In higher education school choice literature, the interaction between structure and individual agency is essential to broadening knowledge in this area. This is especially significant in examining the ways that structure influences agency and vice versa in racial/ethnic student populations, and to what extent is school choice really *a choice* for certain agents in lower social hierarchies.

In this chapter I explore how theology school choice process takes shape for participants using the first contextual layer of Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice. Further, the model is useful in framing the layered context by which graduate theology school choice occurs. In my discussion of social and cultural capital, I also emphasize Kiyama's (2010) notion of support described as *funds of knowledge*. Similarly, I illustrate how the participants

use their social and support networks to mobilize capital through spiritual, emotional, and moral support.

As I present the narratives of racial/ethnic minority students, I will explore a hermeneutic lens of habitus that focuses on the biographical and psychological aspect of storytelling. Data were collected using in-depth individual interviews during a four-week data collection period at a School of Divinity that's a part of a top twenty-three private, national university in the southeast – Fischer University School of Divinity. This qualitative research places participant stories center-stage in order to give their voices primacy in describing how they articulate the factors that influence their decision-making and school choice for theology school. It is through analyzing their stories that I answer the research questions:

1. What does the student-choice process look like for racial/ethnic minorities who enroll in a Master of Divinity degree program?
2. How does the student's individual habitus influence a decision to pursue a vocation in ministry and pursue the MDiv degree program?
3. What role does social and cultural capital play in the school choice process of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in the Master of Divinity degree program?

This chapter is organized into four major sections. First, there is a discussion on the research participants, including their demographics. There is a focus on the language participants use to describe the “call” by God as a part of their aspirations to pursue professional ministry. This first section provides helpful descriptors of the participants and their context. Secondly, I discuss how participants engaged the undergraduate college choice process in order to fully comprehend their graduate theology school choice process. Thirdly, there is a presentation of the results in relation to Perna's conceptual model of student college choice, with

a particular focus on individual habitus (layer 1) of the theoretical frame – demographic characteristics, cultural and social capital, and the demand for graduate theological education, supply resources, and benefits/costs. The final section of the chapter provides a conclusion, highlighting how the narratives told by participants reflect their individual habitus and influences on graduate theology school choice.

### **Sharing the Call: Early Aspirations**

I guess the call to ministry for me kind of was received maybe my senior year in high school toward my freshman year in college. I believe ministry is my life, my life calling. (Andrew, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv)

The twenty-seven research participants interviewed shared individual stories of their lives, family context, educational background, aspirations, and vocational goals. Further, each participant talked specifically about their graduate theology school choice process. Research participants included African-American, Biracial, Latino, and Multiracial students enrolled in the MDiv degree program. As demonstrated in Table 3, the participant group represents a diverse group with different backgrounds. For instance, while the mode age is 23 years old, ages of the participants ranged from 23 years old to 60 years old, with an average age of 30 years old.

Though there are commonalities in some cases, no single story was exactly the same. As each individual is unique, so is their narrative. Racial/ethnic minority students are not monolithic and offer distinctive and personal accounts of their aims, opinions, beliefs, motivations, and values. The narratives of the research participant represent the weaving together of stories that highlight the individuality of persons (habitus), while also holding in tension the structural contexts that make up the material and economic realities of not only persons, but communities of peoples.

Table 3

*Demographics of Interviewees (N=27)*

Age	Average Age: 30   30 years and younger: 63%   Over 30 years: 37%
Gender	Male: 33%   Female: 67%
Religious Tradition	Mainline Protestant: 48%   Nondenominational: 33%   Evangelical Protestant: 15%   Catholic: 4%
Geographic Region (Hometown)	Southeast: 67%   Mid-Atlantic: 11%   Midwest: 7%   Southwest: 7%   International: 7%
Race/Ethnicity	African-American: 81%   Biracial: 11%   Latino/a: 4%   Multiracial: 4%

Not only did participants express something about how they see themselves, but they also said just as much about how they experience God in their lives. “I think I'm supposed to go to greater platforms than just what I have now. I think fear has limited my vision to see what actually God has in store...,” said Yolanda, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year MDiv, who has a desire to work in ministry with young people. Some stories demonstrate a sense of release into God’s will and God’s desire, even amid great uncertainty about pursuing the degree and the participant’s professional future. Janay, a 26 year old African-American woman who had been in the workforce for three years prior to applying to graduate theology school indicated, “This is it and it’s not even so much about it being easy because it wasn’t an easy decision for me to leave the security of being in banking, a very profitable industry, to leave a salary where I could be at the top of a corporate ladder.”

A sense of God’s calling was articulated by all of the research participants, and was often recalled from an earlier age:

Well, I’ve had a calling to the ministry dating back to March of my 11th grade year of high school. So I knew that at some point this would be on the career trajectory. And so

after getting the calling and finally saying yes, then I knew it was a done deal. (Michael, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv)

Michael's sense of his call goes back to a specific period in high school. Not only is he able to recall the specific time, but also acknowledges a surrendering to the call. He further articulated that his tradition in the African Methodist Episcopal Church requires the MDiv as a necessary step for ordination. Zoe, a 1<sup>st</sup> year student, recalls conversations with her mother about ministry:

My mom asked me what I was going to do when I grew up and then I was probably like 9 years old, and I was like, well, I want to be a preacher. God called me to be a preacher. I'm going to be a preacher. (Zoe, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv).

Amid the call stories, often the narratives included expressions of giving up one's own desires to answer God's call. For example, Rosalyn explicitly states, "God called me against my will like most people and I feel like if I'm going to do this, I represent [God] and I have to be the best. And the best means I have to know what I'm talking about." Other expressions were also explicit in describing how the call may have deterred other plans:

I was called like everybody else. I didn't want to come to divinity school. At first, I wanted to go to law school, but it just seemed like everything was kind of pushing me towards this. And that was it. And I just said, you know, God, I'll do what you want me to do, but you know I can't afford it. Whatever you want me to do, you'll make a way. (Lisa, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv)

Like Lisa, there were also a number of individuals who articulated a God who was actively at work in their lives and prompting them in the direction of graduate theology school. Malika, after being out of school for over ten years, described how she "began to really just pray and ask God what He wanted me to do and for [God] to just use me however [God] saw fit. So I remember hearing the Lord say, it's time for you to move." Felecia, even knowing of a call upon her life, delayed moving in the direction of responding to the call:

So I always believed that I had a call upon my life, like, this sense of call from God, so I had to answer it. But I felt as though I didn't really want to answer it, especially in undergrad. (Felecia, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv)

This sense of call or pursuit toward vocational ministry is a framing narrative for most research participants. For participants of this study, this framing narrative informs decisions related to the graduate theology school choice process. For instance, Christine explained, “God was like, ‘This is where you’re supposed to be.’ I knew that this was the place, and I had gotten the go ahead from God, and I’m just like, okay, God.” Ashley, explains her motivation to pursue the MDiv in the following way:

One of my main motivations was knowing that this is where God has called me to go was into Divinity School and into some level of full-time ministry, which I didn’t quite know what that looked like. I was praying that it wasn’t congregational ministry. And it just hit me like this is what I can actually do – I can do this as a vocation. It doesn’t just have to be kind of a side thing. (Ashley, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

When asked more about why she was seeking a master’s degree given that her Baptist tradition does not require a graduate degree for employment, she responded, “I would say a sense – my sense of call, my desire to know more about the Bible, and my desire for impacting the world, which I think can be done through the Christian faith.”

The analysis of the data suggests that an individual’s call story is a significant and pivotal part of the overall narrative expressed by participants. The growing sense of God’s call is directly connected to the core of what is identified as one’s purpose in life. Whether a call from early in life or one that requires relinquishing some things, one’s call story is formative and generative in nature and informs decisions related to graduate theology school choice.

### **Transitioning From College to Graduate Theological Education**

This was definitely a different mindset from undergrad, like, oh, I have to go to school because they're all telling me that I need to go to school so I can thrive in the world and be a good citizen as opposed to – oh, I have questions and I need to be in a community in which I can ask these questions, feel safe about that, and work those things out... (Evelyn, 3<sup>rd</sup> year MDiv).

Understanding more about how participants in the study engaged the undergraduate college choice process provides a springboard to knowing more about how their graduate theology school choice process took shape. For many research participants, their narratives did not simply begin with a decision to enroll in the MDiv program. Rather, there is an educational continuum that is connected to their undergraduate choices and experience. This continuum is linked to decisions to pursue a masters-level theological degree rather than some other type of vocational training or Bible College.

For some, the process was very similar to what they recall about their college choice process. For Marcus, a 23 year old African-American, he did very little research prior to going to his large public university. The search stage of his choice process for graduate theology school included minimal research prior to applying to the program.

So to come to [Fischer], having not researched the institution, was completely in line with how I chose my undergrad. And it's really completely in line with almost how I live. I do a lot of jumping then looking. I did not make a research decision. My research was pray, and see what happens and everything just happened. I've been kind of rolling with it since but the decision to come to [Fischer] was a faith one and one that lined itself up. (Marcus, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

Yolanda also indicated that her college choice process was similar to her decision-making for divinity school. Both in her college choice process and graduate theology school process, she wanted to stay close to home and she only applied to one institution in both cases. Yolanda reported being driven by wanting to be close to family. Further, she described herself as a procrastinator who waited until the last minute to search for a college and a graduate theology program. If not accepted to her school of choice, she simply indicated that she would be okay since she had not provided much time or space toward the process.

Others explained that their undergraduate choice process was primarily driven by parental involvement. Many reported that attending college was a clear expectation from their

parents, whom were mostly college educated themselves. Ben, a 24 year old public policy major in his undergraduate studies, stated “my mom went to [Texas] for her undergrad and master’s degree and so it was always, you will go to [Texas].” Clear preferences from parents were conveyed by most research participants including Janay; explaining that her parents ingrained in her that it would be ideal for her to attend a historically black college. She expressed that her parents also preferred she attend a college in-state because of the perception that it would be more affordable. Lisa also had a similar experience with her family preferring that she stay closer to home, but she also wanted to remain influential in her younger sister’s life.

In more than one case, participants explained that they felt like they had little to no choice. When Michael was asked how his decision-making process was similar or different from transitioning to college and then from college to a graduate theology program, he replied “they were extremely different. I was told where I was going for undergrad.” Though Michael applied to seven different colleges for his undergraduate education, he expressed feelings of his father really not giving him an actual choice. Similarly, Kirk asserted that both of his college-educated parents influenced his and his sibling’s undergraduate school choice by stating, “They wanted me to get the in-state money...so pretty much they decided for me...” Additionally, Kirk’s parents believed in the vision of the school and had a favorable view of the institution’s academic reputation.

For nearly all of the participants the decision to go to college was expected by a parent. Several expressed that they could not imagine not going to college and it was a natural progression from high school. However, none directly reported an expectation from a parent to attend graduate school. Rather, once a vocation like law was a possibility, participants reported enthusiasm from parents at the possibility of them attending law school. Even with the

expressed desire to explore ministry as a vocation, parents typically did not expect for their child to progress to graduate theology school.

Second year MDiv student Ashley said that she didn't feel that deciding to go to college was really her decision. She goes on to convey her graduate theology school choice compared to her undergraduate choice process by stating, "But I feel like, this choice was more my choice because – I mean, my parents were like, we'll get you through undergrad or whatever, but after that my mom was clear after four years, like, you're on your own as far as financially and figuring out that."

The data suggest that there is yet another group of students that emerged. These students were not influenced during any educational transition point by a parent. This was due to parents with limited education, parents with little to no involvement in their lives, abusive households, and/or under-resourced environments. In these couple of cases, research participants reported that others in their lives, non-family members, suggested the possibility of attending college.

According to Bridgette, a woman who identifies as a 49 year old biracial lesbian :

It wasn't that I consciously chose to go to college. It was that the people in my life – there was a couple, Tom and Linda – who knew me and knew how devastated I was, made it their mission to help me. And they saw college as the best thing for me. (Bridgette, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

Evelyn grew up in foster care and experienced positive adult relationships in what were called "resource families." Since the age of six, she was separated from her three siblings when she entered the children's home that would literally be her home until she transitioned to college.

Well, I didn't think I was going to go to college, but the people that are around me pushed me to go to college. I, kind of, had this I can't attitude – I think, in high school; and I think the community around me really believed in me and helped me to figure out that school was something that I could do. I didn't test very well in high school and I had some learning disabilities, so I didn't really feel like college might be the best option for me. (Evelyn, 3<sup>rd</sup> year MDiv).

There was a broader community of people who encouraged these particular students to consider college. Further, these supporters became mentors and friends that were instrumental throughout the college search stage and ushered them into their undergraduate experience. However, in their graduate theology school choice process, these students made the decision independently. For Evelyn, her decision to pursue the MDiv had more to do with theological questions that she wanted to explore for herself. While for Bridgette, she always felt like being a minister was in her DNA, but she was unable to articulate her calling for the first twenty-five years of her life because she attended a church that did not support women in ministry or gay people in ministry. Nonetheless, later in life she had what she describes as a “burning bush” moment in which she independently responded to God’s call.

The narrative of these students and particularly their school choice stories provide evidence related to how the span of decision-making from undergraduate college choice to graduate theology school choice unfolded for these racial/ethnic MDiv students.

### **Individual Habitus**

I discerned that I wanted to be grounded more in a formal theological education. I’d always considered my work to be faith-based. That was like the thing that really motivated me to go into social justice work in the beginning. But then I wanted to go deeper into understanding about how God works in my life and in that kind of work in general. (Gilberto, 3<sup>rd</sup> year MDiv).

Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of habitus is illustrated in the participant’s narratives as they discussed their individual formation and the environment they experienced. Habitus, one’s system of dispositions or norms that invoke particular perceptions within social reality, is the first contextual layer used in the theoretical framework for this study. In addition to an individual’s demographical characteristics like race, ethnicity, and gender, habitus exists and acts out of particular structures or material conditions. Habitus, according to Bourdieu (1977), is

one's system of dispositions results from an organizing action or structure; forming dispositions, norms, tastes, preferences, that become a way of being or habitual state that becomes embodied. Endorsing this notion from Bourdieu, Perna (2006) asserts, "A conceptual model that draws on both economic and sociological perspectives assumes that students' educational decisions are determined, at least in part, by their habitus, or the system of values and beliefs that shapes an individual's views and interpretations" (p.115). Thus, it is important that the data reflect the biological and demographic characteristics as well as capital that are deemed cultural and social in nature. Organized with Perna's conceptual model in mind, the thematic data outline is highlighted in Figure 3.

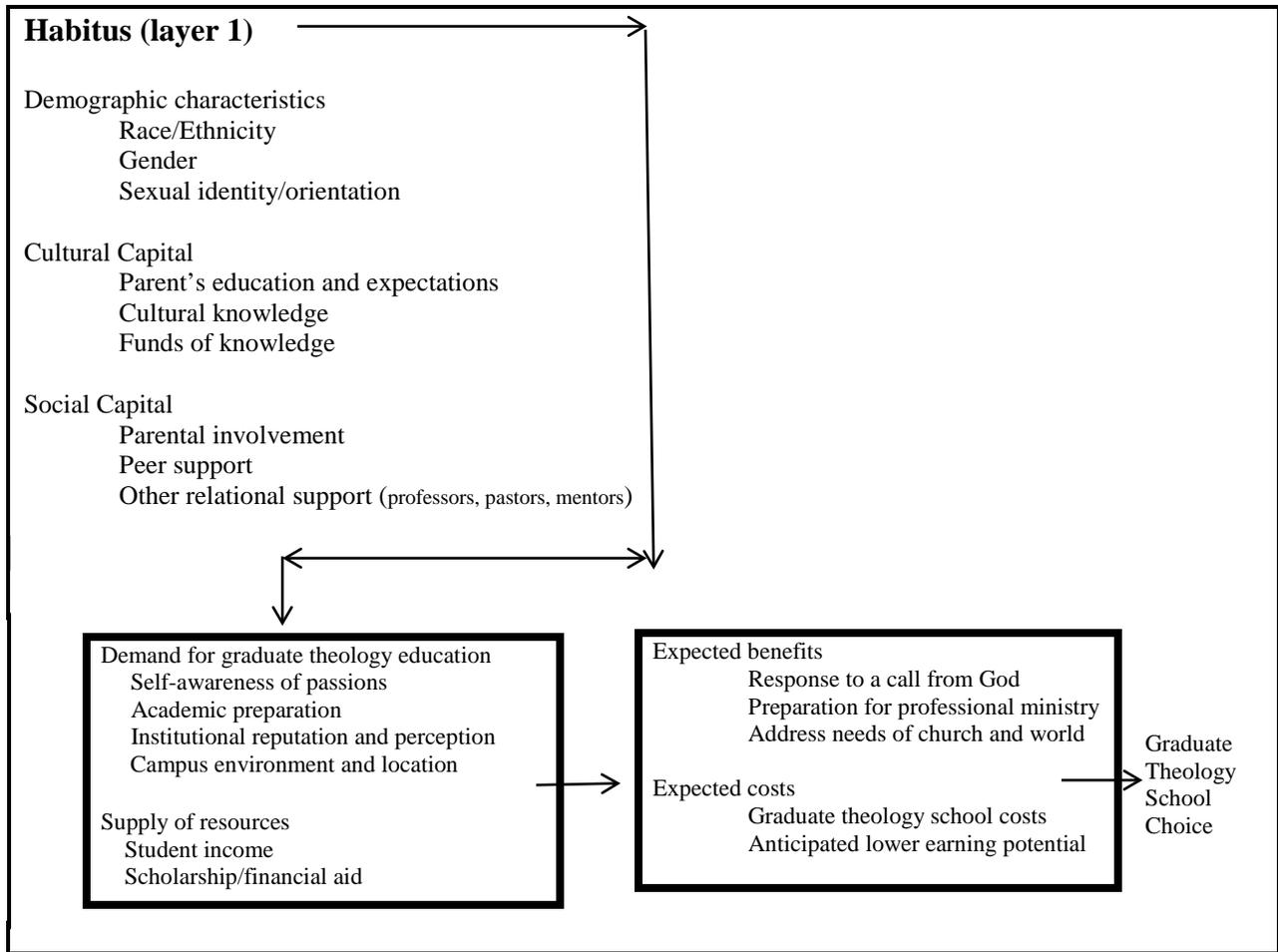


Figure 3. Thematic data outline of graduate theology school choice

### Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics typically include race, ethnicity, gender, and social economic status, as well as cultural and social capital. The key findings in this area address these characteristics as expressed by participants and how they view themselves as well as issues related to race, gender, and sexuality diversity. For instance, Karen, a Black native of Belize shared, “I don’t always think of myself as a minority and here in the United States people talk about African-Americans or Latinos or Hispanics or Asians being minority groups and I don’t always think of myself that way.” For some participants, the view of one’s self as it relates to demographic characteristics reflects a post-racial era in which Zoe, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year MDiv student,

describes herself in this way, “I identify first and foremost as LGBTQ, then female, then black. So if that makes sense in the way that I choose settings or institutions.” Perna’s conceptual model of college choice (2006), accounts for these types individual differences as well as how various contexts shape decisions (Bergerson, 2009).

### **The expected minority.**

Many participants expressed expectations to be in the racial minority in their educational institutions. Often their sentiment stemmed from their previous contexts and was influential in their graduate theological school choice. Marcus grew up in a small town and was often the only person of color in his Honors or AP classes. Thus, he had not fully considered what it would mean for him to attend a predominately White institution for graduate theology school. He recalls typically being the only African-American in a class of at least twenty students from Kindergarten to college. Marcus reflectively proclaimed:

So this entire time, this entire time until my first year in divinity school I never identified myself mentally as a black male. I knew I was black; I was in black organizations, I was in NAACP, all this stuff. I knew I was black, I knew *Lift Every Voice* better than anybody that’s singing in harmony. But I had never grabbed and made my own and realized what this skin meant until first year of divinity school. (Marcus, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv).

Having grown up in the children’s home, many of Evelyn’s resource families were White. She too grew up in a predominantly White environment and confirmed she has not spent a great deal of time focused on her particular demographic characteristics. Given the context of her upbringing, she did not give much thought to being a racial minority because she grew to expect to be the only one. Evelyn said, “actually, in the past three years, being at [Fischer University School of Divinity] I’ve probably thought more about being a black woman than I ever have thought about in my life.”

A few participants articulated being keenly aware of their race/ethnicity and were cognizant of enrolling in a predominantly White institution. Gilberto is in his final year in the MDiv program and is the only Latino male in the program. He stated:

I kind of like felt that – in other work that I've done in ministry, too, I'm not afraid of going to a place and knowing that you're going to be the only one. Because I kind of see it as an opportunity to be like the trailblazer, in a way. Somebody's got to be there. Otherwise, no one's going to be there. So yes, I was conscious of that and I thought in optimistic terms that maybe I could help in bringing the Latino perspective to the students – To bring my voice, my perspective, into the discussions. So I saw that as a positive thing. (Gilberto, 3<sup>rd</sup> year MDiv).

Andrew articulated the importance of diversity generally, but shared that regardless of the demographic composition of the student body that if he was accepted into the program, he would simply make the best of the situation. After reflecting more on race and his graduate theology school choice process, Andrew acknowledges feeling like being at a theological institution like Fischer University School of Divinity would equip him to not only exist in his context in terms of the African-American church, but would also prepare him for leadership in any context and any religious community. Having attended a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) for her undergraduate experience, Janay conveyed similar sentiments since she was the only African-American woman invited to the Fischer University School of Divinity scholarship weekend visit where the most prestigious scholarships are offered to applicants. Janay said:

I was already under the impression that I would be one of a few, even on the [Fischer] Scholars visit, I was the only black female so in my mind, I felt like I had already created an expectation of what I was gonna walk into. I expected to be the only one. (Janay, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

### **Racial diversity.**

Research participants, who expressed the importance of race in their consideration of a graduate theology program, reflected on this demographic component in specific ways. For instance, there were some thoughts that emerged regarding a visible person of color in the

admissions office. Marcus admits that he had limited information about Fischer University School of Divinity, but was motivated to apply after meeting an African-American woman on the admissions staff when he visited campus. He recalled his amazement when he learned that the woman was the dean of admissions. The visible representation of a person of color in a position of power had such a profound influence on Marcus that he reported this to his mother immediately following his visit to the school. Shortly after, he applied to the program. Lisa cited that having an African-American woman as the dean of admissions was integral in her decision-making process. Thinking about his considerations of race and his graduate theology school choice process, Ben stated, “I think seeing [the dean of admissions] as a person of color coming in, that was helpful. And I felt like oh, well maybe I won’t be swimming against the tide necessarily.”

For several of the study’s participants, there was minimal consideration of matters related to race in their decision to apply Fischer University School of Divinity. For these particular participants, there was neither consideration of the racial composition of the student body or faculty, nor were there any specific linkages made about their own racial identity and enrolling in the MDiv program. On the other hand, race was influential in some decisions not to attend a nearly exclusively African-American divinity school or one that lacked racial diversity. Michael was among the most expressive in his desire to benefit from being a Black male in a predominately White institution. When invited to share about how his school choice unfolded and considerations about attending a predominantly Black institution, Michael explained:

I didn’t want to go to an HBCU, but could go to a White school with a low number of African-Americans. My race would be a commodity especially given I’m an African-American male, one of the most in-demand minorities in the world (Michael, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

Having recently graduated from a HBCU, Zoe had some strong feelings related to attending a similar institution for her graduate theology education:

I did not want to be at HBCU anymore. Administratively, HBCUs are probably one of the worst places you can be. I'm not even lying. It's something about my people, we just do not – we don't do right when it comes to money, when it comes to deadlines. It's not good. (Zoe, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv).

Christine, on the other hand, had a good college experience at a HBCU. Nonetheless, she was clear that she wanted a different type of graduate school experience. She explains:

I went to a HBCU when I was an undergrad, so I wanted a change of scenery for me, and I knew just the [Anna Julia Cooper Theological Seminary], when I went there, I was like, "No, I'm not going here." I decided on something different because I wanted diversity. Like I had the African-American experience like in the HBCU, and I wanted a different experience where I just didn't see people that looked like me, but they were diverse. You know, they were from different backgrounds and you see that here. (Christine, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv).

Kirk also expressed great satisfaction with his undergraduate experience at a HBCU, but he made clear that he wanted something that would take him out of his comfort zone and provide opportunities for conversations and experiences with other students who do not look like him and have different backgrounds.

Malika expressed that for her, race was not much of an influence on her decision to attend a particular divinity school. Rather, she discussed being extremely self-aware of being a Black woman and how that fueled her desire to be highly educated. Her perception was that because of her race, she was all the more motivated to personally excel. While socioeconomic status was not heavily emphasized by participants, participants referred to their socioeconomic status with some awareness as it relates to their racial identity. For instance, Malika reflected on her own sense of privilege:

And so for me to be at [Fischer University School of Divinity], I had to look at my race from a different perspective in the fact that before I considered myself to be

underprivileged, but to be at [Fischer], I realized that I'm very privileged. So looking at that, it made a difference. (Malika, 3<sup>rd</sup> year MDiv).

### **Other forms of diversity.**

For several research participants racial diversity was extremely important and influenced their graduate theological school choice. For Regina racial diversity is essential, thus, in her search for an MDiv program, she also looked for other forms of diversity as well. Regina articulated, "I wanted some place that was diverse not necessarily racially, but just in other areas as well." She went on to expound on her thoughts in this area after reflecting on the school's mission and vision:

I just didn't want a school that was cookie cutter; everyone's the same kind of mentality. And I definitely saw that and really what [Fischer] stood for which was mind, body, and spirit, really growth of the whole person. When I saw the "whole person," I was like yep, that's where I need to be. (Regina, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

Minerva, whose racial identity is biracial with a Mexican and White racial background, also indicated a desire for diversity beyond just race. She explains one of the reasons she decided to attend Fischer University School of Divinity:

I'm not just interested in racial diversity, but also LGBTQ and various theologies. Well, all the professors come from different faith traditions, that's really important. It's just that [Fischer] is more open in accepting of like – not just like LGBTQ or different races. It's accepting of different theologies, and I feel like I'm not being boxed in by a particular tradition. (Minerva, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv).

Demographic characteristics for participants included emphasis on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religious traditions. Key findings included how influential a diverse environment is to this population of students. The diversity described included race, but also moved beyond race.

### **Cultural Capital**

The notion of cultural capital was developed by Bourdieu in an effort to acknowledge class-based socially relevant skills, abilities, tastes, preferences, and norms that though not explicitly visible, can lead to inequalities that are socially reproduced (Bourdieu, 1984). Further, these cultural activities act as a form of “capital” or resources that include knowledge about education and educational attainment (Bourdieu, 1977). For racial/ethnic minority MDiv students in the study, cultural capital included their cultural knowledge, their parent’s education and expectations, perceptions about higher education, and funds of knowledge.

### **Parental education and expectations.**

Parental expectations were a central part of the narratives of most participants. While parental encouragement and family variables are an important predictor in the predisposition phase of the college choice process (Perna & Titus, 2005), it was not found to be a factor in this study. Most of the younger participants expressed general support from their parents, but not necessarily in the form of encouragement for them to pursue a graduate theological education. Lisa comes from a single-parent household. Her mother was a teenage mother having Lisa’s brother at age fourteen and giving birth to Lisa at age sixteen. Nonetheless, Lisa’s mother was able to eventually attend college and ultimately earn a master’s in public administration. Even having a difficult upbringing which included a time of homelessness, Lisa expressed that she always wanted to attend college. “I didn’t think I had a choice, but I definitely always wanted to. I always considered college my way out, so I just worked hard for that goal,” recalls Lisa. Though her family supports higher education generally, Lisa indicated that there is a sense that there is more of an expectation for the women in her family to pursue higher education. For instance, her brother did not complete high school but eventually earned a GED at age twenty-one. Women were thought of as more independent and stable and not much was expected of the

men in the family. At some point in her discernment of her vocational path after college, Lisa considered applying to law school. She expressed surprise that her family was not excited about her decision to pursue the MDiv degree. While her mother is supportive, she prefers that Lisa do something where she could earn more money. Lisa recalls her religious grandmother's reaction:

She is like, but I thought you were gonna go to law school. [Fischer]? Is that law school? I thought that – because she's very, I would say, very religious, but definitely very spiritual, and so I thought that she would be proud that I was answering my call. I think she was just more focused on having a lawyer in the family and making money and making a big name and all that. (Lisa, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

Findings included more stories of parents who offered little to no encouragement for participants to attend graduate theology school. Ben, a 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv student, knew from an early age that he would attend college and was steered toward a particular large public university in his home state. His mother and stepfather are both college-educated. Ben's mother has a Master's in Social Work, while his biological father has a high school education. Ben's stepfather, who has been in his life since age fourteen, has the Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree. As Ben explored the option of attending divinity school, his mother was not encouraging. Since Ben majored in Public Policy and African-American Studies, his parents encouraged him to go to law school. Though his parents were influential in his life, he explained:

I was studying for the LSAT one night and I realized that it didn't matter to me... And I realized that I needed to make sense of my life and the lives of those around me. And if I was going to believe that it was God that was controlling it all, that's fine. If I wanted to believe that there was no God, that's fine. But I had to figure out what I believe for me. (Ben, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

Ben's stepfather was also discouraging of his interest in the MDiv. "My stepdad still doesn't tell people I'm going to divinity school." According to Ben, his stepfather is concerned about the financial investment of pursuing the MDiv and the perceived limited return on investment. He also reported that other family members just think this degree is just a stepping stone to where he

will ultimately go – law school or a PhD program. “My stepdad, for him it’s dollars and cents, you are incurring debt to do something that’s not necessarily the ultimate goal and you can do so many other things, why would you do this?” Ben’s parents are supportive of him and affirm him as a person, but he is clear on how they feel – “But it’s not oh, this is a great thing that Ben is doing. And so the conversation it’s definitely, well, Ben is going to be applying to law school soon.”

Additionally, most of the participant narratives revealed no expectation from parents for them to attend graduate theology school. Yolanda’s parents instilled the idea of attending college in all their children. Though her parents are divorced, there was a clear expectation that all their children would attend college. Yolanda’s father has a master’s degree and is a retired educator, while her mother completed two years of college and is a pre-school teacher. Yolanda, a first year MDiv student, is a middle child who not only articulated her parent’s expectations, but also demonstrated a clear interest to attend college out of her own desires. Not only did Yolanda complete college, but her two siblings also earned an undergraduate degree. However, Yolanda reported that graduate theological education was her choice and that her parents had no expectations that she earn a master’s degree.

Andrew was born to two teenage parents who gave birth to him when they were seventeen years old. Raised primarily in his grandparent’s middle-class household, he was taught from an early age to value education. Both sets of grandparents were highly involved in Andrew’s life and contributed significantly to his evolution as a person. Andrew’s parents both attended college after his birth, though his father never completed his degree. In fact, his maternal grandmother has a master’s degree. Recalling the expectation that he be productive in life, Andrew explained how his mother was able to complete college even after a teen pregnancy:

My grandmother for years worked, she was an administrator at Bennett College. So when I came onto the scene it was my mother's senior year and she graduated and... she opted to go to Bennett College which is where my grandmother worked so she didn't have to pay no tuition...Actually they had a laboratory day care which is where I stayed, the Children's House. (Andrew, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv).

Andrew's parents and family emphasized the value of higher education, so when asked why he decided to attend college he replied, "I went to college essentially because I had no choice. It was either college, the military, or the workforce. I think my, my parents and my family was very adamant about that." He further explained, "...that you were going to do something productive with your life. Luckily, I chose and had the initiative that I wanted to be in college because I had dreams and aspirations. So that was why I picked to attend college." Andrew explained that it was this same initiative, not a particular expectation from his family that drove his decision to seek the MDiv.

Minerva, a first-year MDiv student, has parents who have always valued higher education. Her father, a business owner, has a master's degree from Mexico. Her parents met in Mexico when her mother was working on her master's degree. Minerva grew up in a middle-class family that was bicultural and bilingual with English and Spanish spoken in her home. As Minerva recounted expectations from her parents, she stated, "It's just expected. I mean, both my parents have master's degrees. I didn't know that there was another choice." However, Minerva's brother whom she described as "he looks more Hispanic," attended a four year college but ended up transferring to a two-year college. It was at this two-year college that he earned an associate's degree. In the high school that Minerva attended in a border town to Mexico there was not a common expectation to attend college. Thus, Minerva recalled that she was a good student and it was really the influence of her parent's own educational attainment that made her feel like it was expected for her to go to college. However, there was not a similar expectation

for Minerva to attend graduate school. Nonetheless, Minerva shared “they are supportive. My dad doesn’t really get. He just doesn’t get it. He thinks I’m spending a bunch of money to become poor.”

Another theme that emerged related to parental education and expectations is that higher education is generally highly valued by the families of the participants. Rachel had plans to become a teacher as she neared the end of her undergraduate education. Both her parents have some college credit, but only her father completed a degree. Rachel would be the first in her immediate family to earn a graduate degree. Rachel is Puerto Rican and Caucasian and describes her more extended family as having eleven nationalities represented. She has a sister who will soon graduate from college and an older brother who is fifteen years older who Rachel doesn’t think attended college at any point. Even though her mother didn’t complete college, Rachel shared, “education has been something that my family has always stressed as important.”

Similarly, Ashley’s environment growing up reinforced a positive perception of higher education and created an expectation of college attendance. Her mother earned a bachelor’s degree and her father has some college credits. She expressed surprise about why she decided to go to college. “Hmm. I don’t know if it was a decision as much as just that’s what you do after high school, which later in life I realize is not the story for everyone.” She further explained the perceptions she had as a teenager regarding where the expectation to go to college derived. “I think from everywhere,” she stressed. “From my parents, like, it was never a question of whether or not we were going to college. You go to elementary school, then middle school, then high school, and then you go to college.” On her mother’s side of the family education is highly valued. Ashley’s maternal grandmother has a master’s degree. On the other hand, Ashley is the first grandchild on her paternal side of the family to attend and graduate from college. Ashley’s

parent greatly influenced her academic path and forbid her from majoring in her desired field. Ashley wanted to be in the vocal and music theory program, and she recalls, “my parents were just like ‘No.’ And they were like, ‘What else can you do?’” Ashley, a self-described creative type, explained that they called her interest “fluffy” so she became a political science major and expressed an aspiration of attending law school. She went on to explain how her aspirations shifted and her perceptions of graduate theological education:

The summer after my junior year, I was praying about which law schools to go to because that was my – that was what I was supposed to be doing. And I couldn’t figure out which law schools to go to, so I took some time to just step out and pray and think and had some other people praying for me as well. And divinity school came into my head, and I was, like, no that’s the fool. Like, that’s not – it doesn’t make sense. I mean, I’m not a preacher. I’m not doing any of that. But the more I prayed about it, the more – and the more I looked at what I wanted to do and what I was passionate about, the more I realized I was a very ministry-centered individual. (Ashley, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

To Ashley’s amusement and surprise, her parents were excited. She expressed feelings of uncertainty and fears that her parents would, like in undergraduate, say “like absolutely not.” Instead, Ashley’s parents were excited and affirmed her newly discovered vocational path. Nonetheless, she stated, “my parents don’t see me as, like – and I quote from my mom – like, as a poor preacher.”

### **Funds of knowledge.**

The limited cultural knowledge that participants and their families have about graduate theological education was a theme demonstrated during the study. Kiyama (2010) defines *funds of knowledge* as the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p.133). The lack of knowledge or cultural capital is often detrimental to the college-going process (Ramirez, 2011; Kiyama, 2010). For participants in this study, among the themes that emerged throughout the study was the sense that family members did not quite understand theological education or what

the study participants were doing as a graduate student. Toni, a first generation college student and 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv student, mentioned that her husband and children are supportive but not knowledgeable about what she is doing. “I think there's a positive response, but they don't understand because nobody really has ever done it.” In the same way, Felecia who is also a first generation college student reported “they haven't really said anything about me being in seminary. I don't think they fully understand what it is and what I'm actually doing.”

A lack of cultural knowledge was a consistent theme as participants described the support from family members. Regina left home at age thirteen to go to a private boarding school. She participated in a program designed to identify and support talented students of color in urban cities and encourage college enrollment in selective colleges and universities. At the age of six, Regina and her family immigrated to the United States from Jamaica. Regina, a first generation college student, recounts that with her background as a Black Jamaican and coming to the U.S., education was highly valued by her family. Although no one else in her entire family has gone to college, she expressed knowing that they are proud of her accomplishments. Regina further explained:

I don't think they understand what I do or have done fully. They're just proud of me and happy, but the details of the functions of it they don't know and even explaining it to them might be like, well what's the point. But they highly do value education. (Regina, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv)

Emilie comes from a religious tradition that does not have any educational requirements for ordination, but she opted to pursue the MDiv nonetheless. Both Emilie's parents completed high school and went on to vocational training programs. “They support me. They are very supportive,” Emilie explained. “I don't think they really understand why I'm doing a master's in divinity degree but I told them that God told me and that's enough for them.” Though

Chantrell's parents are both bi-vocational ministers, she also reported her immediate family is supportive but her extended family does not quite know anything about theological education.

For a few participants, the lack of cultural capital resulted in challenging circumstances within their families. Zoe was only expected to graduate from high school. Her emotionally unavailable mother set this expectation for her throughout her childhood. Zoe's father was murdered when she was eight years old and she blames this horrific situation for her mother's emotional unavailability. Though no one expected her to go to college, she was praised for her decision to attend college. Zoe mentioned not wanting to follow the example of her sisters who had children at an early age. During her graduate theology school choice process, her mother expressed the expectation that Zoe go into the workforce. Referencing her mother's perceptions about graduate school, Zoe said, "She doesn't understand now. She's more like well why didn't you just come home and get a job after you finished your undergraduate degree."

The lack of knowledge or cultural capital may be disadvantageous to the college-going process, but not ultimately a barrier in participants deciding to attend graduate theology school. Though there is limited cultural capital as it relates to graduate theological education, participants were not deterred in their pursuit of the MDiv. However, a lack of guidance and basic knowledge from support systems can limit the decision-making process and slow processes (González et al. 2003; McDonough, 1997).

### **Social Capital**

Social capital generally focuses on relations between people that provide productive benefits. Thus, social capital includes expectations spoken and unspoken, information channels between people, and norms between community members. Social capital frameworks help identify how and which resources and networks are crucial in the college choice process for

racial/ethnic minority students (Pérez, & McDonough, 2008). In this research study social capital conveys norms and standards through various relationships – parental involvement, social and support networks that include family, friends, peers, mentors, pastors, and other influential relationships. These connections often provide information about graduate school and provide assistance with processes.

### **Parental support.**

For many research participants under the age of 30, parental involvement was a key part to their college choice process. Parental involvement in the graduate theology school process, though sometimes limited, was still present for some participants in the study. In some cases parents were explicitly supportive, like Rachel, who described her mother's support by saying, "She was right across from me and said I've known you were going to go into ministry since you were four, I was wondering how long it was going to take you to figure it out." While older student Bridgette said, "There's still a little, I think, resentment that I am taking so much time to be a part of this contemplative world and that, sort of ivory tower view of school by working class people."

Parental or family support ranged from enthusiastically supportive to concern about ministry not being a financially lucrative field. Malcolm's mother really encouraged him to attend college. His mother earned her degree when he was ten years old and he can remember from an early age wanting to be an attorney. Malcolm is the first male to graduate from college in his close-knit African-American family. As a single mother, Malcolm's mother worked hard to put him through college and he expressed understanding the value of getting a quality education. Malcolm explained that his mother was supportive of his decision to pursue the MDiv, but had concerns that the location was too far from home. According to Malcolm, some

of his mentors were concerned about the teachings he would receive in divinity school and that he would “lose his Jesus.” Malcolm, however, discussed not being fearful at all and really feeling like divinity school would give him the tools to be effective in his profession.

Unlike their college choice process, participants were not as dependent on the approval of family members in order to proceed on to graduate theology school. Marcus explained that his parents are less of a support structure now that he is in theology school. “So they were supportive in as much as you made your bed, now lay in it type mentality.”

### **Peer support.**

The theme of peer support was important for all participants. Several participants referenced a shifting from parental involvement to experiencing more peer support. For instance, a friend was instrumental in introducing Marcus to the idea of graduate theology school. During his senior year in college, Marcus recalls meeting a new friend on his undergraduate campus. He engaged his friend who was also a senior and inquired what he would do after graduation. Marcus’ friend replied, “I’m going to divinity school.” Marcus curiously responded, “What’s divinity school? Marcus went on to learn that his friend was considering several different options for graduate theology school and invited him to sign up for a student of color day at Ross Divinity School. “They’re having a Student of Color Day. You should go check it out,” Marcus remembered his friend saying. Marcus went to visit for the special day at the suggestion of his friend. Shortly after the visit, Marcus felt led to consider Fischer University School of Divinity and he decided to look it up. His search started and progressed due to peer interactions.

Peer mentoring was an important aspect of the search and choice stage for several participants. As Ashley’s call to ministry became evident, she depended on a group of friends in

her undergraduate community for peer mentoring. Ashley was a leader in the gospel choir in college and had a close-knit group of peers who provided support for one another. Ashley struggled to make a decision about which graduate theology school she would attend. She was accepted at Fischer University School of Divinity and Gadson School of Theology, received comparable scholarship offers from both, and similar opportunities for student employment. Ashley remembers really wanting to go to Gadson School of Theology, but was unsettled in her decision. Ashley spent time in prayer and discernment and asked her peer group to give her space, but invited two of her best friends to be in prayer as well. During Spring Break of her senior year, Ashley describes how the decision unfolded for her:

And we were on Gospel Choir tour and – in March over our Spring Break my senior year, and there was some – I was like, okay. Let me think about the other side. I was just like what if I went to [Fischer]? And there it was – it was an odd – once again that odd peace about my decision, and there was something that, like, felt, like, home about [Fischer]. So I talked to two of my best friends who I had specifically praying, and they were like [Fischer] is it. (Ashley, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

### **Other relational support.**

Findings in the research confirmed that other relationships like that of professors, spiritual mentors, pastors, and religious leaders were instrumental in the graduate theology school process. Gilberto was influenced to consider graduate theology school by clergy who were faith leaders and community leaders in the local labor movement. Toni's social and professional network included people in leadership who influenced her educational choices.

For some participants support during their graduate theology school choice process was located in their religious communities. Christine was born and raised in the Black Baptist tradition. Her mother is an educator who has a master's in education and her father went to vocational school. Christine's support network includes her mother, pastor, and the first lady of her church. Though Christine's father and brother do not believe that women should be leaders

in ministry, Christine has found support and affirmation among others. Additionally, Christine described the importance of her relationship with Pastor Scott. He was a professor at her college, who also was a bi-vocational pastor, so students referred to him as Pastor Scott. It was Pastor Scott who first encouraged Christine to go to divinity school. “He always told us to get a degree, go get a secondary degree, so I said ‘Okay, I’m gonna do divinity school.’” Christine expressed comfort in knowing that her support network was there to encourage her. “These people were surrounding me and telling me that I could, when I felt like I couldn’t,” explains Christine. Christine also discussed her relationship with Pastor Ayers, a female pastor who encouraged her to specifically explore Fischer University School of Divinity’s MDiv program. Just the suggestion of Pastor Ayers to look into Fischer University School of Divinity, had tremendous influence on Christine – “A mentor of mine, Pastor Ayers, she told me to look into [Fischer University School of Divinity], and I looked into [Fischer] without visiting it, but I just knew this is where I was supposed to be.”

Yet for other participants, professors and mentors were instrumentally in their graduate theology school choice. Chantrell was immersed in a graduate program in communications when she realized that the MDiv was a better fit for her vocational goals. In college, her support network included an African-American female professor. Chantrell attended a large public state university and recalls that her experience with her professor was the first time she was taught by someone who looked like her in a higher educational setting. Chantrell identifies this professor as a mentor and a significant part of her support network. Another professor, Chantrell explains, influenced her decision to consider an MDiv and to attend Fischer University School of Divinity:

And my professor, one of them was a graduate of [Fischer] undergrad. And he was like, your work has a theological tinge to it, you should go there. But all I could think of was black small bible college before I could even look into what the program was. (Chantrell, 3<sup>rd</sup> year MDiv).

Recognizing that she had a call to ministry, Chantrell attributes the encouragement of this professor, as well as her father, for helping her start down the path of graduate theological education.

### **Demand for Graduate Theological Education**

I cannot function as an individual without knowledge and I – for whatever views I personally have on the inerrancy of Scripture, I think there's a lot of wisdom contained in the notion that people die without a lack of knowledge and the church is currently dying because of bad theology or inconsistent theology in cases. And it became more than important to me that if I do decide at whatever point to pastor or stand in front of people that I am not only educated, but that I am educated well. (DeWan, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv)

Embedded in the idea of habitus in this study is the perceived demand for this type of education which is pivotal to comprehending graduate theological school choice. In addition to reflecting on an individual's demographic characteristics and cultural and social capital, there are other elements that are also components of habitus. For instance, understanding the demand for theological education is essential to fully understanding the individual habitus of participants.

For participants in the study, the perceived demand that shaped their graduate theological school choice included discovery of their passions, how they view the need for an educated clergy, perceptions about how academically prepared they were for graduate school, how they viewed the reputation of the theological school, as well as whether they felt a sense of community and belonging.

#### **Self-awareness of passions.**

An important theme in the graduate theology school choice process for all participants was a growing awareness of what makes them come alive or their passions. Felecia majored in Health Science at a small HBCU. It was her pastor who first mentioned divinity school to her as a possibility. Felecia's pastor has a Ph.D. and encouraged her to consider that the next step in

her responding to her call would be to attend seminary. Felecia's response to this idea was, "I was thinking of all I would learn and I was thinking about my own passions. Like, my passion is the Bible, my passion is God, so if I wanted a career then I was going to have to go to a school where I could learn the necessary skills that I needed in order to pursue a career in that."

Connecting one's passions to theological education was an important refrain for participants. Karen completed her undergraduate degree at age thirty-one at a liberal arts women's college. Karen immigrated to the United States and grew up in a household with the ideals that to gain knowledge is to gain power. She realized that she likes discussing theology. Further, Karen believes that faith issues and spirituality are important to every aspect of our lives. "It affects our ethics, it affects how we think about people, it affects how we think about human dignity and human worth," she passionately stated. Having felt a sense of call at the age of sixteen, Karen expressed wanting to change the world and believing the MDiv will equip her for the task:

There is the thought in the back of my mind that I don't always give a voice to – Like wanting to start a non-profit organization. A faith-based, non-profit organization that helps people who are in a food or economic crises that moves them from dependency to independent sustainability. I can change the world with what I do here and what I learn here. I can make connections with other people. (Karen, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv).

Karen's graduate school choice was directly related to connecting her passions with the institution's mission and resources. "[Fischer University School of Divinity] talks about social justice issues. And not very many theological or seminaries talk about social justice, not just within the context of church, but outside the walls of church." Karen's interests goes beyond serving in a church setting. She is fervent about talking about racial issues, social justice issues, and economic equality and discussed how the MDiv program at Fischer University School of Divinity aligns with her interests.

Malcolm thought of attending a Bible College at some point in his undergraduate studies. He opted to attend a graduate theological program upon completing his Business and Finance degree because he thought it would offer him more. He explained, “I believe divinity school offers more exposure to theological and different philosophies and I feel like when I get out of here, I’ll be able to navigate through any environment.” Malcolm has a passion for business and has started a process of imagining how he can mix his interest in ministry with business. As Malcolm dreamed about the possibilities in our discussion he mentioned entrepreneurship as a means of providing a flow of resources to ministries that need them the most. Though he thought he would attend law school at an earlier age, he is more interested in ministry and business at this point. He reflected, “I knew that it was something greater than just going to law school and I knew that divinity school was probably a near future choice that I had to make.” Malcolm is even considering whether he will pursue a Master of Business Administration (MBA) or JD (Juris Doctorate) after the MDiv to equip him to be a consultant in business and ministry.

Some participants started exploring their passions and that eventually led them to making a choice for graduate theology school. Evelyn came to graduate theological education not because she was clear on a particular vocational path. Rather, she came with her questions and wanted space to explore these questions. “And so I had questions that are still not answered because in seminary you have more questions than you have answers by the time you finish.” Evelyn discussed the desire of being in an open environment where she could explore her interest as she explained, “I had questions that I wanted to wrestle with and I wanted to be in an environment in which I could do that. And that was driving me towards coming to theology school.”

Others had considered what made them come alive for some time and knew that theological education was the next step. Kirk, a native of South Carolina, first thought of pursuing a call to ministry his sophomore year of college. He was raised in a middle-class religious family who values education. Though his father wanted him to pursue dual degree options like the MDiv and the JD so that he could earn a more substantial salary, he was only interested in the MDiv. Nonetheless, Kirk applied to law schools to appease his father but was not accepted. Kirk demonstrated clarity about wanting to become a pastor in a congregational setting. Given the sense of call to be a pastor, Kirk expressed that being an educated clergy was essential. He explained, “All the pastors who I began to look at whether it was inside South Carolina or outside South Carolina, all of them had MDivs.” Kirk stressed that he wanted to gain more knowledge and the main reason for pursuing the degree is to seek truth. Additionally, Kirk clarified that he aspires to continue his theological education by eventually earning the Doctor of Ministry degree (DMin).

Similarly, Minerva grew up in the Episcopal Church and had imagined since she was a teenager of being a priest. She was an acolyte, participated in the youth group, and went on mission trips. She remembers thinking maybe she could just go to an Episcopal-related college and find a husband that was a priest and that would satisfy her longings. Even though she sensed a call, Minerva said, “So I said no, I don’t want to do that, and did other things, and I strayed off the path for a while.” After joining the Peace Corps and doing environmental work for the Army for a few years, Minerva begins searching for degree programs to suit her passions. She decided she would apply to dual programs. “I was trying to apply to graduate school and getting a master’s in theology instead with a dual [degree] in international relations.” During her application process for this type of dual degree option, Minerva shared, “I couldn’t write my

essays. I just couldn't write them because I just wasn't passionate about it. I was trying to go for something that didn't call me. I gave up on writing essays. I went to work, and I hated it."

### **Academic preparation.**

Several students expressed a concern about being academically prepared for graduate theology school. Their concerns ranged from feeling inadequate, not knowing what to expect, worry about having a low undergraduate grade point average, to perceptions about the academic reputation of the institution. These types of perceptions can influence decision-making related to school choice and cause students to exclude themselves based on their sense of belonging (McDonough, 1997).

"I guess that was the biggest concern – that I would not be prepared for a situation like this, especially from what a lot of people would assume coming from a historically black college," replied Andrew when asked if he was academically prepared for graduate theology school. Andrew reported that his undergraduate transcript was inconsistent. He decided to consider theological education because he always liked the idea of serving his community and the world. Andrew stated, "I've always been very into the church but I felt as though my participation into vocational ministry would be how I can change or make an impact on my community. So that is why I'm here." Despite his inconsistent academic history, once Andrew was accepted into the MDiv program he reflected upon how he now feels the need to prove that he actually belongs here. His perceptions of his level of academic preparedness and connection to how he views the institution became clearer when Andrew explained, "this is an esteemed university. One of the best private institutions in the country and, and in my opinion it's kind of, it's kind of like that place on the hill where you have to deserve the right to go there."

Other participants also expressed a concern about being academically prepared for graduate theology school. DeWan, a vocal performance major, attended a rigorous high school and was in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program. Most of his peers went on to college. DeWan went on to enroll in a college strictly for the arts. He expressed deep regrets about choosing such a narrow undergraduate path. As he considered his choices for a graduate theology school program, he said, “So I considered all of the big names and immediately crossed a lot of them off the list for economic reasons, for my sense of feeling like I’m not prepared reasons...” When asked if he was academically prepared for graduate theology school, he responded, “No, I felt like my high school program prepared me for graduate school.” DeWan clarified that because of his participation in the IB program, he was doing college level coursework that required a lot of writing each week. Although DeWan graduated from his undergraduate program with a high GPA, it was in the IB program that he learned time management “and actually taking ownership of an academic vocabulary and lexicon came at that time, not in undergrad.” Further he asserted:

The divinity school process was actually a lot more complicated because my undergraduate degree did not give me tools to jump into an academic environment that was in any way related to what I was doing while I was there. We were not an academically focused school at all. It was all about your art and that took precedence over the academic thing. (DeWan, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv).

Some students reported concerns about their academic preparedness because of having been out of school for a long period of time. Bridgette, having been out of school for twenty years, had no idea what to expect in graduate theology school. Bridgette started her time in college in community college prior to joining the military. After several challenging experiences, Bridgette was encouraged to complete her degree by a close network of mentors and friends. Her undergraduate career in Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Sciences was not challenging but

she worked three jobs while completing the degree. Nonetheless, Bridgette graduated with at least a 3.0 grade point average (GPA). “I’ve been through Air Force basic training, I’ve been in war zones, I’ve seen horrible crime scenes, I’ve done law enforcement, I grew up in a violent home, and the hardest thing I ever did was my first semester at div school.” Bridgette already has a master’s in education, but feels called to chaplaincy. Though she expressed having confidence and a good intellect, she discussed struggling with more technical items related to academic success like doing citations properly.

Janay described the idea of pursuing the MDiv as uncomfortable. She had transitioned to divinity school from working a few years in the banking industry. She was unfilled in her career, but discovered her passion to work with young girls and became invigorated spiritually. Janay sees graduate theology school as a part of her journey to become equipped and challenged. “I think I was academically prepared, but I don’t think I’ve been trained to operate within this context academically. I’ve never experienced it. Did I have academic capacity upon coming? Yes. The academic capabilities, yes but had I ever done this before? No.”

A few participants admitted to not being focused on academics. Ashley is a self-proclaimed poet, singer, and painter. She is creative and values outlets that allow her to express the arts. Ashley reflected on her undergraduate experience by saying, “I never really valued academics. I valued extracurriculars because that’s what I love to do, so academics was, like, a means for me to stay in a space where I could do extracurriculars.” Thus, she admitted to having very poor study habits. Ashley also was not quite sure what it would mean to be academically prepared for the MDiv program. She clarified, “I don’t even know if I really knew what theology was.” Now that she is enrolled in the program she is learning to value academics more and yielded, “I guess, that academics can be a part of what you love.”

Yet, some students were confident in how academically prepared they were coming into the MDiv degree program. Regina attended a highly selective Ivy League school and said, “I was definitely prepared socially and then even through skills of learning how to study, how to read, all these things that I always tweaked and learned added things on to.” Minerva also attended a highly selective university, and recalls that she had an exceptional GPA in her undergraduate program and emphasized having good study habits.

### **Institutional reputation and perceptions.**

The reputation of the institution and perceived quality of the theological education was an emerging theme. The reputation factors named about a graduate theology school were not only academic reputation. Rather, the participant’s narratives spoke about institutional reputation related to matters of diversity: racial, sexual identities, denominations, multi-faith, etc. Additionally, perceptions related to institutional resources, offerings, and inclusiveness influenced the choices of many participants. For instance, Lisa only considered university-related divinity schools. As she reflected on why that was the case, she recounts her undergraduate faculty advisor encouraging her to apply to places like Theon Divinity School, Harper Divinity School, and Fischer University School of Divinity. She was admitted to two of the three schools; having not been admitted to Theon Divinity School. When discussing why she made the choices she made, Lisa explained, “[Fischer], the Div School, is smaller. It’s newer. And I would say that even though Harper Divinity School has programs that talk about diversity, it wasn’t a lot of diversity.” Lisa reflected more earnestly on her decision-making process for divinity school and stated:

I guess a part that I never really thought about it, but it’s important to me now, is like if the place is LGBTQ friendly. I didn’t think about that before, but I definitely – actually, I did think about that. I didn’t think that [Fischer] was going to be. (Lisa, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

Prior to learning more about Fischer University School of Divinity, Lisa's perception of Fischer compared to Harper Divinity School was due to limited information about the school's openness to LGBTQ students.

Because I didn't like get that type of information when I came [to visit campus] or experienced people who were out or anything like that. And I definitely saw that at Harper. And so I actually thought that [Fischer] was gonna be very close-minded, very Baptist, and I was just like, oh, no, I'm gonna be in such a place, you know, where I've already been experiencing... place where things are like open and people can just be themselves. And I thought I was gonna get shoved back into a box, and so I was happy that I found that that wasn't true. (Lisa, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv).

Lisa admits to not knowing much about divinity schools options. Having only applied to university-related theology schools— all of which are not affiliated with a denomination – was demonstration of Lisa's desire not to attend a school where she would “get shoved into a doctrine that I did not understand or believe...”

Many research participants mentioned that earning the MDiv was motivated by the need or desire to have credibility. Graduate and professional education is an essential part of human capital accumulation, resulting in prestige within a profession or economic rewards (Zhang, 2005). Ben said proudly, “I was looking for schools that had institutional clout that would open doors.” Marcus wanted to attend a reputable theology school that was accredited. His denominational seminary in his hometown is not accredited and is primarily designed for those without a college education. Since he would be relocating for divinity school, it was important to Marcus to have the resources to make his education possible. He recalls having a potential job on campus, housing, and a scholarship all lined-up. Additionally, his perceptions of the school were shaped by the embodied presence of a person of color in what he considered a position of power. He explained:

I felt the school could relate to me because at the time [when I visited campus] there was no one here, they were on break and so [the dean of admissions was] the only person I

met...But [she was] the person of power ...but I just knew [she was] a person of power at this school and I was black too. So that meant some kind of safety. (Marcus, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv student).

Similarly, Kirk stressed that the credentials associated with earning the MDiv was important. Kirk wanted to attend a graduate program with a rigorous curriculum that would challenge him. He presumed that because he attended a small undergraduate institution and Fischer University School of Divinity has a relatively small student body that they would be similar in some regards. For instance, he recalled expecting to have personal relationships and opportunities with professors as he did in his undergraduate program.

Chantrell did not visit campus prior to applying to the school. She knew that the prestige of the institution was important and she wanted a place that valued diversity. Doing all of her research about divinity schools via the Internet, Chantrell reported she could sense the diverse community and affirmation of all people. At the same time, Chantrell shared her perceptions about the institution as it relates to socioeconomic status:

I wanted to go somewhere that reflected – this is going to sound so bad – my socioeconomic status. Well, not mine, my parents, I guess I would say. I didn't want to go anywhere that was cheap or somewhere that if you saw it on a resume it didn't have a – you weren't impressed with me. That sounds so bad. (Chantrell, 3<sup>rd</sup> year MDiv).

Toni is considered a second-career divinity student. She is a nurse who decided to pursue a different career path later in life. In some ways, she was considered bi-vocationally since she worked as a nurse, but also was a minister in her local church. Though her religious tradition does not mandate that their ministers be formally educated, Toni explained why this pursuit was important to her journey: “I wanted to expand my resume or credentials as a minister and I felt as though a formal education degree behind your name opens doors for you that you may not have the opportunity, or you develop a respect.” She is interested in a number of vocational options including jail chaplaincy, nonprofit ministry, or Christian education. As she shared these options,

Toni also discussed the strong reputation of Fischer University School of Divinity and wanting career advancement.

A student's background, undergraduate institutional characteristics, and the student's undergraduate school experiences can influence their decision-making process for graduate school (Ethington & Smart, 1986). For example, Rachel's previous experiences compelled her to want similar encounters in graduate theological education. Rachel is a candidate for ordination in order to be a pastor in the Lutheran Church. Being a part of a diverse setting is crucial to her and where she thrives. Rachel attended a small, yet very diverse college in terms of racial and sexual identity. She is also a member of a theologically diverse church. With her undergraduate background in theatre, she has grown accustomed to appreciate differences in all people. With this context as a backdrop, Rachel applied to Fischer University School of Divinity, Ross Divinity School, and Lutheran Divinity School and was accepted to all three schools. As an introvert, Rachel felt like the classes at Ross Divinity School were too big and that a smaller setting would enable her to have a relationship with professors. Though she thought of Ross Divinity School and Fischer University School of Divinity as comparable peer institutions, she recalled the personal attention she received from Fischer University School of Divinity and a clear expression that she felt valued as a person. Though she received a full tuition scholarship from the Lutheran school, she proclaimed, "[Fischer] Divinity is also much more academically rigorous."

Similarly, other participant's background influenced their choice process. Regina remembered doing a Google search on divinity schools in her state and Fischer University School of Divinity was one of the first to come up. She recalls, "I read the statement and mission, and I fell in love with it because it mentions mind, body and spirit or mind, body and

soul and wholeness.” Prior to discerning a call to ministry, Regina worked in higher education in student affairs. She loved student affairs, but it was not her vocation. She’s interested in a variety of integrated disciplines like divinity, psychology, education, and teaching to serve communities. Regina shared what she described as a God-given vision to open a faith-based nonprofit center. She believes the MDiv will bring credibility to her future work. Regina also perceives that her values are reflected in the values of the institution. For example, she describes herself as a community-oriented and relational person and describes her graduate theology school in similar terms.

Several participants perceived the institution to be diverse and open in multiple ways.

The range of diversity was expressed well by Rosalyn when she stated:

I wanted a program where I could learn and be who I am and not have to worry about being ridiculed for my beliefs. You had different religious affiliations, different denominational affiliations. And I wanted to be able to meet people who could add to me and help me kind of grow and stretch personally, but more than anything spiritually. (Rosalyn, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv).

Rosalyn considered attending a Bible College since her older brother had attended a local Bible College. Since she plans to seek a PhD in biblical languages, she was interested in attending a well-respected university. Rosalyn was also concerned about receiving a theological education that would prepare her for a variety of vocations – not just for pastoral ministry.

Many participants expressed how crucial it was for them to enroll in an MDiv program that was denominationally diverse. For Jimmy, attending a graduate theology school that was ecumenical was a significant factor. “I came to [Fischer University School of Divinity] as opposed to some denominational school that would want me to be a denominational guy.” Jimmy considered a Bible College at the same time he considered Fischer University School of Divinity. Ultimately, he expressed wanting to be challenged knowing that it would be a more

liberal setting given his theological perspective. Gilberto also expressed that even though there would not be very many Latinos at the school, he liked that the school was ecumenical.

Minerva also emphasized how essential a diverse graduate school environment was to her. She not only noted that an ecumenical and racially diverse environment was important, but she also discussed the multicultural contexts for ministry requirement in the curriculum. For Minerva, who is concerned about global relationships, this type of requirement helped form an impression of the type of institution she would consider. Minerva stated, “you guys offer the dual degree, and you guys offer good financial aid, and you’re just like where seminaries need to be going generally.” She went on to explain, “Like theologically, you’re with the modern times. You know what I mean? I feel like seminaries especially are way behind.”

#### **Campus environment and location.**

Participant’s graduate theology school choice was influenced by many factors, including the campus climate, level of faculty/student engagement, and proximity to home. Research of racial/ethnic graduate students indicates that reputation of school and faculty, proximity to home or work, financial considerations, preferred academic program, and campus environment were influential factors for graduate students when choosing a graduate school (Ramirez, 2013; Strayhorn, Williams, Tillman-Kelly & Suddeth, 2013).

The visit to campus was a critical part of the decision-making process for some participants. “When I was touring the campus, people were asking me about what I was interested in doing, and they actually sounded interested and they were telling me classes that I might want to take or people I should talk to,” recalls Ben. He took this personal and relational approach to heart during his graduate theology school choice process. Ben shared that he appreciated the strong sense of community, the accessibility of faculty, and that there were

African-American professors. Ben also felt assured in his graduate theology school choice once he imagined how he could be a contributor to Fischer University School of Divinity. He explains, “And I thought that at [Fischer University School of Divinity] Ben could actually have a voice and be a part of the – be a part of who [Fischer] is and what [Fischer] becomes.” Ben limited his graduate theology school search to his home state. As a native of the state, he said “I didn’t want it [theology school] to be far away and feel like I was on my own for three years.” As he honed in on a decision about which institution to attend, Ben carefully explained, “I got to the place of where would I feel most comfortable at, and [Fischer] kind of won out. And so that means that when I went on tours, I saw people that looked like me.”

Regina’s experience upon visiting campus was positive. She shared, “I felt the sense of calm and warmth and peace and I felt similar to how when I found my undergrad school. Further, those she met made an impression on her. “I loved the faculty that I met and I loved just the piece that got me about [Fischer] – that you focus so much on vocation.” Regina felt led to pursue the MDiv and had a vision about her future vocation. Being in a campus environment that provided attention to those seeking what form their vocation might take, was appealing to Regina. After applying, Regina reflected on how she felt about the process: “I had a feeling in me I was going to get in. It wasn’t even because I’m the greatest thing ever, but it was like I just know I’m going to get in...I’m supposed to go [Fischer].” After learning more about her acceptance and scholarship packages, she recounted, “I sat there and I was like I’m in exactly the right place at the right time. It just was perfect.”

Zoe visited campus during a special diversity day with a group of other students interested in graduate education. “I was a little nervous, but I enjoyed the way people conversed with me and really seemed interested in what I was looking to do, how I was feeling about

[Fischer], and just kind of felt good when I came here.” One of the things that Zoe identified as important to her choice process was that the environment felt good, open, and affirming.

Similarly, Felecia valued the campus climate as she described the place as one with a sense of community with opportunities to make friends and to be supported by faculty.

For a few students location or proximity to home was a driving force in their school choice process. Most of these students were older and considered less mobile due to family expectations or obligations. Rosalyn is among the oldest students in the program. She was keenly aware that she wanted to attend a graduate program near her current residence. Rosalyn had gone back to college to earn a second bachelor’s degree in religion to retool herself for graduate theological education. Because Rosalyn excelled in her second Bachelor’s degree program, her professors encouraged her to consider relocating and applying to Strother Divinity School or Theon Divinity School. However, Rosalyn was invested in staying in the local area in order to remain connected to her church. Thus, she applied to Fischer University School of Divinity and no other schools primarily because of location, but also because it was the best fit for her. When reflecting on her experience of the campus during her search process, she said:

One of the things I wanted was a place where I could fit in and when I came here that's the sense that I got. And I think I visited here two or three times and I just kept coming back and talking to people and kind of looking at everything. And so I kind of felt like this was going to be a good fit for me. (Rosalyn, 1st year MDiv).

Proximity to home was also important to Gilberto. He researched online options for the MDiv, but Gilberto decided he wanted a more structured placed-based program. He felt that a residential educational environment would help him. He explained, “I wanted to make a full commitment to doing this kind of academic work.” Recognizing that moving out of state was not an option for his wife and small children, proximity to his home was a significant factor. Similarly, Toni expressed that proximity to her home was essential in her choice process.

Referring to the location of Fischer University School of Divinity, she said, “I mean it’s right around the corner from my house.” Likewise, Malika, belonging to a close-knit African-American family, would only consider at graduate theology programs within an hour of her mother’s home.

### **Supply of Resources**

A part of the graduate theology school choice process for participants includes their supply of resources. Perna (2006) contends that in order to understand the school choice processes among different groups, using a model that integrates sociological and economic approaches is warranted. This study reveals that both economic and sociocultural factors influence graduate theology school enrollment for racial/ethnic minority MDiv students. The supply of resources to pay the costs associated with enrollment in the MDiv plays an important role in graduate theology school choice.

For graduate theology students there was typically no mention of family income related to their parents. Rather, the research participants only considered their individual circumstances or, if married/partnered, their immediate family situation. As students reflected about their socioeconomic status (SES), they typically reverted to the SES growing up and not as a reference to their individual or current circumstance.

For some participants scholarship and financial aid was essential to their choice process. Michael, a 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv student, was among a select group of applicants invited to participate in the scholarship weekend. As a prospective student, Michael presented a strong application for admission and was considered for some of the school’s most distinguished scholarships. As Michael reflected back on his application process to multiple theology programs, he said, “Well, according to my advisor, she said if I could get a 3.5[GPA] with my black male status, you’re

golden anywhere you want to go.” Michael continued on to explain how he consciously understood his status as a black male with high academic achievement and his expectation that institutions would provide resources for this education. Michael confessed of his time as a prospective student in search of a graduate theological school,

I have to find those places that have extremely low numbers of minorities and those are the places that I applied to because there you’re gonna become a hot commodity. And I hate to say that racism is a commodity, but everyone wants to have diversity because if they’re not diverse it looks bad. (Michael, 2<sup>nd</sup> Year MDiv).

Having grown up in a middle-class family, Michael was among only a handful of research participants who named receiving a scholarship as an essential part of his choice process. He applied to six or seven schools, but narrowed his choices to Fischer University School of Divinity and McLee Theological Seminary. Michael was invited to the scholarship weekend at both institutions, but Fischer University School of Divinity made the earliest scholarship offer. Without a firm offer from McLee Theological Seminary, Michael reported, “I would have to tell [Fischer] ‘No’ on the promise of something potentially, versus a solid package.” He continued by explaining, “So really it was [Fischer] just made an offer I couldn’t refuse at a time where I was not in a position to say no.” Michael also made decisions based on the earlier information he gained during the process. He stated, “Because [Fischer University School of Divinity] made that offer mid-February I didn’t even apply for the March 1 applications.”

Similarly, the availability of scholarships was among the top three reasons Minerva cited for attending Fischer University School of Divinity. Minerva graduated with a 3.9 out of 4.0 from her undergraduate institution. She had joined the Peace Corps shortly after graduation and spent two years in Nicaragua. Minerva feels call to be a priest but also wants to be a licensed counselor. Thus, she applied to the Master of Arts in Counseling through Fischer University’s Graduate School of Arts & Sciences at the same time she applied to the MDiv. She decided to

enrolled in the dual degree program which is a MDiv/MA in Counseling. Minerva expressed that she appreciated that the school offers practical skills for vocations inside and outside the church. She explained her reasons for being in divinity school in the following way: “God wanted me to..., because you guys offer a touch of the secular I wanted..., you guys are paying me to go here, and that’s a third reason.” Minerva, the only Latina invited to the scholarship visit weekend, was also among a group of prospective students in her class to be considered for the school’s top scholarship. She was among a very small group of students offered a full tuition scholarship plus an annual stipend.

Felecia agreed that having the resources to pay for school was significant for her. She indicated that her primary motivation for coming to Fischer University School of Divinity “was my pastor encouraging me to come and also...the ministry and to answer this call.” She clarified, “first of all [Fischer University School of Divinity]was giving me a scholarship – a full scholarship, so I was thinking about that. But I was also thinking about the fact that I was feeling a pull, type, thing to [Fischer].” Felecia shared this information as she reflected on the many African-Americans in her social and support network encouraging her to attend a black theology school.

Many research participants reported that their ultimate decision was not driven by financial aid or ability to pay through their own resources. Wanting to respond to her call faithfully, Lisa proclaimed to God, “... I’ll do what you want me to do, but you know I can’t afford it. Whatever you want me to do, you’ll make a way.” For Ashley, who reported that she grew up in a lower middle-class family, she was elated to have received a scholarship and to be provided federal aid. However, the scholarship was not a factor in her decision to attend any particular divinity school. Regina receives a good scholarship, but still has loans. She said, “So

it wasn't necessarily fully the money, that helped, but I still have a lot of loans so it was just a sense that nope this is where I'm supposed to go."

Though the supply of resources is generally deemed important, for many participants the ability to pay was not mentioned as the motivating factor in the majority of participant's decision-making process. In fact, several participants only mentioned financial resources when directly asked about how they were paying for school. Most mentioned a combination of scholarships, loans, and employment. Approximately 22 percent of participants (6 out of 27) proactively mentioned the role scholarships or financial aid played in their graduate theology school choice.

### **Expected Benefits and Costs**

College choice is ultimately based on a comparison of the benefits and costs (Perna, 2006). Assessments of the benefits and costs are not only shaped by the demand of higher education and the supply of resources, but also by an individual's habitus (Perna, 2006). Research participants in this study articulated their reasons for enrolling in the MDiv degree program and expressed the benefits in terms of gaining the professional skills needed for various vocations in ministry. The costs associated with the degree were secondary, at best, for most participants. Consideration of the benefits was at the forefront of their stories while cost was in the distance background.

Several participants expressed the benefits of seeking the MDiv as they reflected on the skills they would gain for professional ministry. Jimmy, a 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv student, is married and has two small children. They are supportive of him coming to divinity school to respond to God's calling in his life. Jimmy explained what he hopes to get out of his theological education:

I wanted to increase my vocabulary. It's one thing to just talk about The Bible, and know about The Bible, and to understand how vast this world of God, of theology really is.

You cannot know all of it. I figure it would be an advantage to come to a place where it will give me a start, for example. (Jimmy, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv).

Several participants mentioned the desire to become more knowledgeable about the Bible and theology in order to better serve people. Toni is active in her church and as a result of going to a series of Bible classes led by her pastor; she became interested in learning more about theology and the Bible. “I want to be the best qualified minister or preacher that you can be because people are hurting and they have things that you don’t want to pass or minister incorrect information.” Toni believes that by attending theology school she is positioning herself to be the best she can be. Further, she articulated that the MDiv is preparing her for her future work and is professionally formative. “So you want to know why I came to divinity school? Okay. I guess just to be the best that I can be to serve God's people, that's it. And I think also you get connections, too.” The benefit of a theological education affords her the opportunity to expose herself to new things and higher learning.

Michael said he decided to attend seminary “to get a broader theological understanding beyond some of the garbage I was getting preached from the pulpit.” In addition to the MDiv being required in his denomination, he expressed a deep desire to use rhetoric in a meaning way. Michael believes the church is in trouble and he is concerned about the direction of the church. Thus, Michael expressed that a graduate theological education is essential to the church. “An educated clergy is able to better administrate, better educate and better inform,” Michael asserted.

Some participants expressed the benefits of enrolling in the MDiv degree program beyond just gaining biblical knowledge. Bridgette is seeking to gain more knowledge for her vocation as an ordained minister who will likely go into chaplaincy. Bridgette also believes the benefit of seminary is about formation or polishing. She explained the benefit in the following way:

In seminary we basically learn a foreign language. All these ideas, and values, and theologies that I hold I've had for a while and they're being validated. Some are being shifted. I've not been changed dramatically, but I'm able to articulate now and will continue to learn how to articulate God in a way that people can understand. And while the Bible is one source of relationship with God, it for me, is the lesser source and that ministers who have not navigated divinity school, don't have access to other sources is – I think, the real reason the church is on decline. (Bridgette, 2<sup>nd</sup> year MDiv)

Further, many participants articulated the need to be prepared to provide leadership in a complex world. Andrew said, “So I thought that if I want to be the most productive in what I want to do then seminary is definitely a non-negotiable tool that I need.” Andrew did not consider graduate theology school as an optional exercise. Rather, he felt it was essential. “I think for me, in the 21st century, where you have to answer a number of questions...concerning sexuality and gender, you can't just operate on the Holy Spirit or whatever you call it. You need stepping stones and academic education,” Andrew boldly proclaimed. As Andrew considered his choices for his seminary education, he wanted to find a place with a good academic name. As he weighted options, he stated, “I wanted to find a place that had actually good academic name. Where you know it had some weight to it. And then I wanted to find something that was also a little cost efficient.” Though financial resources and an ability to pay for school was not the most influential factor for Andrew in deciding to attend divinity school, he understood the benefit of good academic name and that it would cost something. Similar to the Manski and Wise (1983) findings, this study confirmed that participants expressed a preference to enroll in a program with a strong academic profile and lower costs.

### **Conclusion**

This study illustrates the ways that racial/ethnic minority MDiv students engage the graduate theology school process. Perna's (2006) proposed conceptual model of student college choice is an integrated framework that draws on both human capital and sociological approaches

that provides a comprehensive approach to understanding the graduate theology school choice of the research participants. The racial/ethnic minority MDiv students interviewed for the study demonstrated that individual habitus, one's embedded social and cultural capital and a series of internalized dispositions is used to form decisions and choices. As noted in Perna's model the economic context is also important and accounts for the demand for graduate theological education, supply of resources, and expected benefits and costs.

The results of the study were framed by using Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice, with a particular focus on habitus (layer 1) of the theoretical frame – demographic characteristics, cultural capital, and social capital. The participant's narratives are rooted in call stories that ultimately led to an aspiration to be in professional ministry and then to seek a theological education. These narratives connect the participant's college choice process and how their decision-making unfolded for their graduate theological education. Whether directly or indirectly influenced by cultural or social capital operating in their lives –from their cultural background, family, social and support networks, educational background, community, and/or societal structural realities – the narratives that were shared provided a greater understanding of the aims and motivations of the participant's graduate theology school choice.

## **CHAPTER 5: INTERPRETATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

The United States is becoming increasingly more diverse. The U.S. population is approximately one-third minority, but racial/ethnic minorities are expected to become the majority in 2042 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Recent data from the Carsey Institute shows that in 1990, 32 percent of the U.S. population under the age of 20 was comprised of members of minority groups (Johnson, Schaefer, Lichter, & Rogers, 2014). The same data indicates that now racial/ethnic minorities make up 47 percent of the population under the age of 20 (Johnson et al., 2014). The growing racial/ethnic diversity of the U.S. and thus the composition of higher education will continue to have a dramatic influence on students who engage theological education as well as on institutions themselves. Just as with undergraduate enrollment, racial/ethnic minority student enrollment in graduate schools has risen significantly. As theological education experiences significant changes to serve an ever-changing society, theological schools need to adapt to the changing demographics. Specifically, racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in graduate theological education grew from 13 percent in 1990 to more than 24 percent in 2009 (Aleshire, 2010). Despite the various decreases in overall enrollment in graduate and professional education, there are a significant and growing percentage of minority students in graduate theology school. The shifts in the religious environment and those attracted to theology schools will have lasting consequences on theological institutions of the future. Growth in the number of racial/ethnic students enrolling in graduate theology school has attributed to nearly all the growth in Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree programs across the U.S. (Aleshire, 2010).

These circumstances present a compelling need to discover how the school choice process unfolds for racial/ethnic students enrolled in an MDiv program. This qualitative study

explores the graduate school choice of racial/ethnic minorities enrolled in a Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree program. In this study, the school choice process is guided by contextual layers as framed in Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice: (1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context. With particular focus on the habitus of students, I presented the students' narratives to highlight their system of values and beliefs that shape their views and interpretations related to graduate theological school choice. Similarly, attention was given to the structural and cultural factors, or organizational habitus, experienced within the undergraduate and other institutional contexts from which racial/ethnic MDiv students emerge. Measures of social and cultural capital that include race, financial resources, parental influences, peer/community/church influences, and academic preparation play an important role in explaining the educational decisions of racial/ethnic students. By exploring these influences, this dissertation provides insight into the graduate theology school choice of racial/ethnic MDiv students.

### **Purpose of the Study: Telling Their Stories**

As a result of the current environment facing religious leadership and thus, theological schools in the United States, understanding the stories of racial/ethnic students is crucial. Particularly, the graduate theology school choice process for racial/ethnic MDiv students has been indistinct. This study was designed to give prominence to the narratives of the participants with the aim to gain better knowledge about their beliefs, preferences, and motivations for enrolling in graduate theology school. Through their experiences, participants describe how they have negotiated various institutions and systems and the range of support received from various persons or entities throughout their school choice processes.

How the graduate theology school choice process takes shape for these students is illuminated by listening to their voices. Further, findings reveal that individual habitus informs graduate theology school choice. This study identifies sources of cultural and social capital for racial/ethnic minority MDiv students, as well as why these students aspire toward professional ministry. Additionally, the findings reveal information about financial resources and to what extent benefits and costs are assessed in the decision-making process for students.

By capturing data through in-depth interviews, more knowledge was formed about graduate theology school choice for racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in an MDiv program. Guided by Perna's (2006) conceptual model for student school choice, this study is responsive to the three research questions highlighted throughout the dissertation:

1. What does the student-choice process look like for racial/ethnic minorities who enroll in a Master of Divinity degree program?
2. How does the student's individual habitus influence a decision to pursue a vocation in ministry and pursue the MDiv degree program?
3. What role does social and cultural capital play in the school choice process of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in the Master of Divinity degree program?

### **Hermeneutical Lens of Habitus**

I feel like individuals have attempted to, I guess define me in their mind, and once I stepped outside that definition I'm now either a threat or they can't comprehend me at times. (Malcolm, 1<sup>st</sup> year MDiv)

The perspective in which narratives are examined and analyzed in this research study is the hermeneutical lens. In this case, the narrative analysis uses Perna's (2006) conceptual model of school choice as a theoretical framework and further explores the decision-making process of racial/ethnic minority MDiv students using the four-layer graduate choice model (Judson, 2012).

In theological education, hermeneutics typically has to do with interpretation of texts including biblically, historically, and theological texts. Using the interpretive tools associated with habitus provides further insight about what the graduate theology school choice process looks like for research participants. Thus, the results of the study were presented with these lenses in mind.

### **The Research Questions**

#### **What does the student-choice process look like for racial/ethnic minorities who enroll in a Master of Divinity degree program?**

Although the student choice process for each research participant was unique and distinct, there were commonalities that emerged in the data that conveyed how the graduate theology school choice process took shape. For instance, participants expressed a strong sense of call by God to pursue a certain vocational path related to ministry, service, and outreach to others. This sense of God's call was the compelling factor that influenced their career aspirations and an ensuing response. The significance of God's call grounded the decision-making process amid uncertainty about theological education or professional vocational options.

The study used Perna's (2006) conceptual model of school choice, with particular emphasis on layer 1 – habitus. This layer included demographic characteristics of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. The students' stories expressed how they view themselves as well as issues related to race, gender, and sexuality diversity. Students' graduate theology school choice was greatly influenced by many students wanting a diverse educational environment, a strong institutional reputation, and a hospitable campus climate.

The students describe their personal identities as much more than race. Most stories reflected some level of consciousness of race influencing the graduate theology school choice of students. Many communicated an awareness of being in a predominantly White environment

and expressions of being accustomed to being in the minority. Other students, whether they were a graduate of an HBCU or not, explicitly described not wanting to attend a Black institution for graduate theology school. Often this sentiment addressed a larger concern of desiring to broaden their perspectives and to receive an education that would prepare them to serve in any religious setting. Intertwined with demographic characteristics were views in which most students wanted a religiously ecumenical setting with diverse theological perspectives. Often the stories that unfolded included narratives of students who exemplified post-denominational sensibilities. Some students expressed that their choice process was not only influenced by wanting to attend a racially diverse place that is ecumenical, but also one that affirms LGBTQ persons.

Students reported being drawn to their graduate theology school program because of how they perceived the school's reputation. For most, they perceived that the theology school they decided to attend offered credibility to their personal credentials. Many students expressed wanting a highly recognized and accredited theological school. This choice was viewed as essential to their vocational path and future opportunities. Further, several students reported the desire to be in a program with a rigorous curriculum that would challenge them. Academic reputation of the institution was reported as a significant influence among students interviewed. Thus, many expressed they were not interested in attending a Bible College because of their perceptions of academic quality.

Academic reputation was only one aspect of the institutional profile that students named as a factor. Just as important was the reputation the institution related on matters of diversity or multiplicity – racial, gender, sexual identities/orientations, plurality of denominations, multi-

generational, and multi-faith. Additionally, perceptions related to institutional resources, offerings, and perceived level of inclusiveness influenced the choices of many students.

A number of students reported the importance of being a part of a relational community. For most, having a strong sense of community, an accessible faculty, and an ethos of welcome and hospitality was highlighted in their graduate theology school choice process. Students indicated that a community that values relationships can be seen in how community members listened attentively to their stories, and the sincerity of faculty, staff, and students. Further, many students identified a fit with the school in relational terms; citing that the school could relate to them, their situation, and their background. Some of the reporting in this particular area seemed tied to the recognition of admissions staff who are persons of color. Additionally, students indicated that being in a smaller academic environment was imperative. Many articulated that smaller classes signaled for them the opportunity to have relationships with professors. Another influencer for students was how the campus “felt.” During their search stage for a theology school program, some described their campus of choice as calm, warm, good, open, affirming, nurturing, and supportive. Campus climate, though subjective to the one who encounters the campus, was a common factor in the graduate theology school choice process.

**How does the student’s individual habitus influence a decision to pursue a vocation in ministry and pursue the MDiv degree program?**

Individual habitus, or the system of values and beliefs that shapes their views and interpretations, is influential in the decision-making process for racial/ethnic MDiv students. Regardless of the concerns of parents and their expectations, students were not deterred from their vocational path. Because of their strong sense of God’s call and emerging realizations of their individual passions, students were able to forge ahead in pursuing a vocation in ministry

and to seek the MDiv. The narratives of students unveil the intricacies of the graduate theology school choice process.

Experiences with self, God, and others in their relational network are all a part of habitus for students. Particularly, understanding the need or demand for seeking the MDiv sheds light on the participants' disposition, values, and beliefs. Many students expressed concern for the church and a hurting world in desperate need for creative, energetic, and educated religious leaders. In addition to feeling a call to vocational ministry, many students began to imagine the possibilities in ministry as a result of negotiating their growing self-awareness and how they engage cultural and social capital.

Students were more inclined to pursue a vocation in ministry and pursue the MDiv degree if they could also imagine how to connect their current passions with what they might experience in the degree program. Several students sought a graduate theology program that they experienced as valuing many forms of ministry, not only congregational or pastoral ministry. For instance, a number of participants indicated an interest in social justice ministry, non-profit ministry, and chaplaincy.

Many students had some religious foundation from which a call to ministry emerged. For several students this was a profound spiritual experience that compelled them to consider ministry as a profession. Further steps to understanding how to progress in professional ministry often came from support networks such as professors, pastors, mentors, and peers.

**What role does social and cultural capital play in the school choice process of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in the Master of Divinity degree program?**

Capital is essential to the graduate theology school choice process. Whether economic, social, or cultural, some form of capital was instrumental in the students' decisions about

whether or not to go to theology school. Because of a sense of a call by God, students were less likely to let economic capital drive their decision to attend. However, for many students scholarships and access to financial resources was pivotal in their ability to pay for school.

Various forms of social and support networks was identified as an individual's social capital. These are the relationships or connections that interact with economic capital in accumulating cultural capital (Bergerson, 2009). The impact of the students' support networks cannot be underestimated. The relationships with family members, friends/peers, mentors, pastors, and other influential community members often propelled them toward responding to God's call by considering graduate theology school. Though important, parental involvement was less evident in the graduate theology school choice process compared to their undergraduate choice process. Several students confirmed that their parents were apprehensive about their choice to enroll in the MDiv degree program because of concerns related to accumulating and sustaining economic and cultural capital. This seemed to be more of a concern for families with higher amounts of economic capital or who identified as middle-class or higher.

Students were not necessarily nurtured or guided toward religious leadership over a long period of time. Some were formed in their church community from an early age, while many were cultivated in high school and college by teachers, professors, and mentors. Further, several student narratives included stories of fear and doubt that was ultimately diminished by these key influencers.

Many students came into the endeavor of theological education with little to no cultural awareness or knowledge about the enterprise. A handful of students were dependent on those in their social or support network and were affected in positive ways by knowing how the application process and scholarships worked. Cultural capital was limited for most students with

many participants reporting that their families have no understanding of graduate theological education. Further, there was not an expectation from many of the students' parents to attend graduate theology school. In some cases, parents explicitly encouraged enrollment in graduate or professional degrees that would yield more economic capital.

### **Overview of Data Collection Method**

The research design included a qualitative method since it is the most appropriate mode of inquiry for this study. This methodology was selected because it constituted the best approach to uncover the factors that influence school choice among racial/ethnic minority students who enroll in the MDiv program. Thus, interviews were conducted with twenty-seven racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in the MDiv degree program at Fischer University School of Divinity – a small, ecumenical, university-related school in the Southeast. The research project, using narrative inquiry, was designed to value the narratives of the individuals being studied. This study sought to understand the aims, opinions, and attitudes of a particular segment of students who enrolled in a particular MDiv program.

### **Discussion on the Limitations of the Study**

In chapter three of this dissertation, potential limitations were identified. It is important to address the potential limitations at the conclusion of this study. There were two matters that were noted as possible limitations in the study: 1) As the senior administrator who admitted all study participants to the MDiv at Fischer University School of Divinity, my role could have an effect on data collection, and 2) As a person of color interviewing racial/ethnic minority participants, responses from participants could be influenced; resulting in a range of comfort levels. It was noted that my position and role at Fischer University School of Divinity, as well as my own identify as an African-American woman could have some effect on data collection. At

the end of this research project another limitation emerged with the participant pool. This limitation will be addressed in this chapter as well.

### **Limitations of the Researcher**

As the senior administrator who admitted all the study participants, I am cognizant of the possibility of response biases from participants. As a practitioner in graduate theological education and an active participant in the profession of ministry, I was able to effectively recruit students to participate in the research project. My knowledge of the field and the institutional culture provided greater understanding of the participants' context. Ultimately, my positionality afforded me the ability to interact intimately with those being studied (Merriam, 2009).

On the other hand, as the researcher I am attentive to matters related to response bias. As a first-generation college student and African-American woman, the stories told by the participants were similar to my own narrative. My ability to have an established rapport with the interviewees, allowed the data collection process to be seamless. Further, my ability to relate to the students' narratives was an asset in interpreting and analyzing the data. To avoid inserting bias in interpreting the collected data, I used respondent validation to not only ensure accuracy of the data, but to also solicit feedback on the emerging findings (Merriam, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This eliminated the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants have shared and helped to identify my own biases in interpreting what is going on (Merriam, 2009).

### **Size of the Participant Pool**

I initially designed the participant pool to include thirty racial/ethnic students enrolled in the MDiv degree program at Fischer University School of Divinity. After soliciting participation via email, I received more responses to schedule an interview than the thirty anticipated. The

initial scheduling revealed that the pool included mostly women in the program and was not representative of the composition of the MDiv program at Fischer University School of Divinity. Therefore, after twenty seven interviews, I deliberately ended the period of interviews. Even with this intentional intervention, the participant pool was still heavily female. Nevertheless, the data collection remained robust and provided significant results.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Although this research has contributed to the body of knowledge on graduate school choice and to theological education, the study has raised additional questions for future research. Particularly, with the focus primarily on layer 1 (habitus) of Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student school choice, additional questions should be considered. Although the study also considered some aspects of the school and community context (layer 2), there was limited attention to this area. The conceptual model was instrumental in successfully integrating economic and sociological models in order to study graduate theological school choice. Though Perna's conceptual model was useful and fitting for the study, future areas of research should contend with possible limitations of the theoretical framework. While this research has contributed to the body of knowledge related to racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in an MDiv program, the study does not explore the other three layers in Perna's conceptual model in significant ways. Thus, this is also an area for future research.

Strayhorn, Williams, Tillman-Kelly, and Suddeth (2013) identified factors that influenced the graduate school choice of HBCU graduates, and cited the low number of students who considered tuition costs and financial aid as a part of their decision-making process. Likewise, most students in the study indicated that scholarships or financial assistance were did not the primary driver in their decision-making to attend a particular graduate theology program. Given

the increasing amount of educational debt of MDiv students, further investigation of why economic factors are not weighed more heavily in the choice process of racial/ethnic minority MDiv students is needed. This is another area of future research that would fill a gap in the study of racial/ethnic minority students in theological education.

There are also comparative research opportunities with exploring graduate theology school choice among racial/ethnic minority students compared to White students. There have been a number of studies that highlight choice differences and similarities among different student groups for undergraduates (Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005). However, this type of research has not been conducted for graduate theological education. Wheeler (2014) reported on students' paths to seminary based on research conducted with 261 graduate theology students. Most students in the Wheeler (2014) report were White and race distinctions were not included in the study. Knowing how the habitus of a comparison group informs the school choice process for students enrolled in the MDiv would fill an important research gap.

Because participants often mentioned academic reputation and institutional profile as a significant factor in their choice process, further study should include student perceptions on theological schools institutional characteristics. For instance, there is an opportunity to gain more knowledge of the graduate theology school choice process of racial/ethnic minority students' perceptions of a particular program area (theology) versus the institution as a whole. Understanding more about how messages about a university overall, impacts how the theology school program is specifically perceived is a crucial gap in information for theological schools.

An additional area for future study includes an analysis by year in the program. While this study included racial/ethnic minority students across the span of the three-year program, there was no segmentation of first-year, second-year, and third-year students. Understanding

more about the school choice process at various stages in the program can further illumine the decision-making of racial/ethnic minority MDiv students as they progress through the degree.

Given that all participants used language about receiving a “call” from God that grounded their decision to pursue a vocation in ministry and to seek the MDiv degree, more investigation should be done to expose the layers of call narratives related to this population and how these stories influence graduate theology school choice process.

Since there is such limited research in the field of theological education that specifically analyses the school choice processes for racial/ethnic minority MDiv students, the possibility of burgeoning research is vast.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The realities facing religious communities and theological institutions are sobering. The demographic factors affecting undergraduate higher education, and thus, graduate theological education are well documented. As the U.S. is becoming less White, institutions of higher learning must adapt to the emerging realities. The shift in the number of racial/ethnic minorities in the U.S. population will also impact communities of faith and the pipeline of leaders who will serve them.

Since enrollment in theological schools is currently declining and the only area of enrollment growth is with racial/ethnic minorities, theological schools must understand the choice processes of these students. Theological schools must learn how to reach, cultivate, and serve racial/ethnic minority students if they are going to continue to remain solvent and competitive. For some theological institutions, they will need to devise long-term strategies to recruit and retain racial/ethnic minority students if they are going to survive into the future.

## **Creating and Sustaining a Culture of Multiplicity**

One of the most significant findings in the study is how essential the notion of multiplicity is during the graduate theology choice process. Students in the study clearly identified that among the drivers to their school choice was seeing or experiencing a multitude of diversity. They not only discussed racial diversity as pivotal, but they were interested in an environment where other types of diversity was held as an institutional value. Thus, creating and sustaining a theological academic environment that values multiple voices is crucial to attracting racial/ethnic minority students. For some institutions, this will require a cultural shift in which long-term strategies can include recruiting faculty and staff that represent various forms of multiplicity. An institution's legacy of inclusion or exclusion can influence how the campus climate is perceived. Thus, theological institutions must take steps to insure diversity becomes a more central educational value and is an institutional priority.

## **Ethos of Community and Relationship**

Any institution that seeks to make diversity a central value of their educational enterprise, must recognize that this is an embodied effort. Students of color often privilege the relational characteristics of communities for which they are a part. Influencers or those in their support network are an example of how relationships can influence decision-making. Communicating a student-centered/community-focused ethos to prospective racial/ethnic minorities and to those that influence them is a critical tactic that should be explored by theological institutions. Any communication must be authentic to the contextual reality of the institution. Further, there can be no ambiguity in the role of theological institutions in the socialization process of racial/ethnic minority students. Socialization, however, cannot be an exercise in assimilation. Rather, it has to be deliberate action by the institution to ensure all students are able to be functioning and

contributing members of the community. The more institutions tend to this reality, the more sense of community will exist for all students. Theological institutions might consider developing educational programs that are curricular and co-curricular to not only help community members discuss race differences, but also the notion of multiplicity which includes sexual identities/orientations, plurality of denominations, multi-generational, and multi-faith.

### **Conclusion**

The narratives shared by the research participants illumine how the graduate theology school choice process unfolded for racial/ethnic minority students in an MDiv program. The study was designed to give voice to these students in order to better understand their decision-making related to choosing a theology school. The results of this research demonstrate that habitus – reflects an individual's demographic characteristics, as well as cultural and social capital – is influential in the school choice process of racial/ethnic minority MDiv students. Additionally, the demand for graduate theological education, supply of resources, along with the expected benefits and costs, are all weighted as these students make decisions about enrollment.

As participants recount their call stories, they highlight how influential their professors, pastors, mentors, and friends have been in propelling them toward graduate theology school. Support from undergraduate professors, pastors, family, and peers provide these students with valuable social capital that aid in negotiating their graduate theology school choice. Though many of those in their family have limited knowledge about theological education, participants demonstrated determination to seek skills and credentials that would help them in being responsive to God's call to professional ministry.

Theological institutions have much to gain from hearing the narratives of racial/ethnic minority students. Particularly, listening to how their school choice process takes shape is essential for these institutions to recruit and serve this growing population.

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## APPENDIX A

### STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

#### Background Data Collection

- 1) Year in Program
- 2) Gender
- 3) Race/Ethnicity
- 4) Age
- 5) Religious Affiliation/Denomination and Religious Upbringing
- 6) Family Educational Background and Occupation
- 7) Hometown
- 8) Undergraduate Institution and Academic Major
- 9) Master's Institution and Field of Study, if applicable

#### Protocol

- 1) Tell me about yourself.
- 2) Why did you decide to go to college? Why did you enroll in the college you did? How did your family and support network value you attending college?
- 3) How did you do academically in college? What was your grade point average in undergraduate and what is your grade point average now?
- 4) What made you decide to go to graduate theology school? When did you first think about going to seminary?
- 5) How would you describe the primary motivations for you deciding to enroll in theology school?
- 6) Was there anything different in this choice compared to your choice to attend college?

- 7) How and why did you decide to attend this institution? Did you apply to other schools?  
If so, where? Were you accepted at other schools? If so, why did you choose this institution over others?
- 8) How did your social location (demographics – race/ethnicity, gender, SES, etc.) play a role in your choice to attend theology school?
- 9) Did you consider yourself academically prepared for graduate school?
- 10) How did your racial/ethnic identity influence your decision to attend a particular theological school?
- 11) How many theology schools did you apply for admission to?
- 12) What were the three top reasons for attending theology school?
- 13) How does your family and/or support network think of you pursuing a master's degree in divinity? Have they been supportive?
- 14) How are you paying for seminary?
- 15) What are your vocational goals? What do you hope to do after you finish your degree?
- 16) Is there anything I didn't ask you about that is important to understanding how you came to make the decision to attend theology school?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A DISSERTATION RESEARCH STUDY**

Dear student,

I am a doctoral candidate in higher education administration at The University of Alabama. I am conducting research as a part of my dissertation titled “Graduate Theology School Choice: An Examination of Racial/Ethnic Minority Master of Divinity Students.” I would very much like to invite you to participate in this important study. However, please note your participation is completely voluntary.

The MDiv program here at Fischer University School of Divinity is the focus of my research study. Because I am interested in the stories of U.S. racial/ethnic students and their decision-making regarding graduate/professional education, individual interviews are essential to my research. Thus, I would like interview you about your predisposition, perceptions, and experiences as a person of color who decided to attend theology school. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place and should last 1 hour. The interview will be digitally recorded to accurately capture our discussion. Your comments will then be transcribed into written words. The transcription will use fictitious names to protect your identity. You will have the option of declining to answer any of the questions during the interview process. You will also have the option of terminating your participation in this study at any time.

Throughout the study, your information will be kept confidential and will only be reviewed by the researcher and a third party transcriptionist. Upon the completion of the research study all transcripts and digital recordings will be destroyed. The results of the study may be published, but your identity will be anonymous. In other words, the final report from this research project will not identify you as a participant in this study.

The goal of the study is to discover how the school choice process unfolds for racial/ethnic students enrolled in an MDiv program by listening to the individual narratives of students. Your voice will add much to this important discussion and research.

Thank you for your consideration. Please respond to this email, if you would like to participate. I will follow-up with you in the coming weeks to schedule a date and time for the interview. In the meanwhile, if you have questions or concerns about the study, feel free to contact me at [REDACTED]. Feel free to also be in touch with my faculty advisor, Dr. Karri Holley, 205-348-7825 (office) or [kholley@bamaed.ua.edu](mailto:kholley@bamaed.ua.edu) if you have questions related to the research study. Lastly, if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact The University of Alabama Research Compliance Office at 205-348-5152.

Again, thanks in advance for your consideration.

Warmest regards,

Shonda  
Investigator

## APPENDIX C

### LIST OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

27 Racial/Ethnic minority Master of Divinity students were interviewed for this study. The table below lists the participants using the names by which they were identified in the dissertation.

The students were assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity.

Name	Race/Ethnicity	Sex	Age	Denomination	Geography
Ben	African-American	M	24	Non-Denominational	SE – North Carolina
Janay	African-American	F	26	Non-Denominational	MW - Ohio
Michael	African-American	M	23	AME	SE – South Carolina
Andrew	African-American	M	23	Baptist	SE - North Carolina
Yolanda	African- American	F	33	Baptist	SE – North Carolina
Lisa	African-American	F	24	Non-Denominational	MW - Iowa
Marcus	African-American	M	23	Reformed Episcopal	SE – South Carolina
Minerva	Latina/White	F	29	Episcopal	SW - Texas
DeWan	African-American	M	23	Pentecostal	SE – North Carolina
Kirk	African-American	M	23	Baptist	SE – South Carolina
Bridgette	Indian/White	F	49	UMC	SW - Texas
Rachel	Latina/White	F	25	Lutheran	SE – North Carolina
Ashley	African-American	F	23	Baptist	Mid-Atlantic - MD
Evelyn	African-American	F	29	Non-Denominational	SE – North Carolina
Malcolm	African-American	M	23	Non-Denominational	SE - Tennessee
Regina	African-American/Jamaican	F	29	Non-Denominational	Mid-Atlantic - NY
Karen	Multi-Racial	F	33	Methodist	International - Belize
Zoe	African-American	F	25	Presbyterian	Mid-Atlantic - MD
Chantrell	African-American	F	26	Non-Denominational	SE - Alabama
Emilie	African-American	F	34	Apostolic	SE –North Carolina
Malika	African-American	F	37	Baptist	SE – South Carolina
Felecia	African-American	F	27	Baptist	SE – South Carolina
Christine	African-American	F	23	Baptist	SE – South Carolina
Toni	African-American	F	41	Non-Denominational	SE- North Carolina
Gilberto	Latino	M	42	Roman Catholic	SE –North Carolina
Jimmy	African-American	M	38	Pentecostal	International - Tanzania
Rosalyn	African-American	F	60	Non-Denominational-	SE –North Carolina

APPENDIX D

October 25, 2013

Office for Research  
Institutional Review Board for the  
Protection of Human Subjects



Shonda Jones  
College of Education  
The University of Alabama  
Box 870302

Re: IRB # 13-OR-322, "Graduate theology school choice: An examination of racial/ethnic minority master of divinity students"

Dear Ms. Jones:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

*(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

Your application will expire on October 23, 2014. If your research will continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely  


The University of Alabama



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(205) 348-8461  
FAX (205) 348-7189  
TOLL FREE (877) 820-3066

**INFORMED CONSENT FOR A RESEARCH STUDY**

**THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA**

**Title of Research:** Graduate theology school choice: An examination of racial/ethnic minority master of divinity students

**Investigator (s):** Shonda Jones

**You are being asked to be in a research study.**

**The name of this study is** "Graduate theology school choice: An examination of racial/ethnic minority master of divinity students."

**The study is being conducted by** Shonda R., Jones, EdD candidate. She is Associate Dean of Admissions and Student Services and Special Assistant to the Provost at [REDACTED]. She is also a student in the EdD program in Higher Education Administration at the University of Alabama.

**What is the purpose of this study – what is it trying to learn?**

The goal of the study is to discover how the school choice process unfolds for racial/ethnic students enrolled in an MDiv program by listening to the individual narratives of these students. The focus of the study is to develop in-depth understandings of the aims, opinions, and attitudes of racial/ethnic minority students who enroll in a MDiv program.

**Why is the study important – what good will the results do?**

The study expands on the previous literature regarding graduate school choice by focusing on a particular professional school context in a field that is underrepresented in school choice scholarship. The research will add critical knowledge to a growing body of research related to graduate school choice and begin to aid theological schools in understanding the factors that attribute to racial/ethnic minorities enrollment in theology school. Gaining such knowledge enables theological institutions to better prepare for an ever growing diverse student population.

The research questions which will guide this analysis include: 1) What does the student-choice process look like for racial/ethnic minorities who enroll in a Master of Divinity degree program? 2) Are the reasons for enrolling in theological school similar among the racial/ethnic groups being studied? If not, what are the distinctions among African American students compared to Latino/a, Biracial, or Multiracial students? 3) How does the student's individual habitus influence a decision to pursue a vocation in ministry and pursue the MDiv degree program?

**Why have I been asked to be in this study?**

You have been asked to be in this study because you are enrolled in the Master of Divinity program at [REDACTED]. We are seeking U.S. Protestants who identify as African American, Latino/a, biracial, or multiracial.

**How many other people will be in this study?**

A total of 30 racial/ethnic minority MDiv students at [REDACTED] will be asked to participate.

**What will I be asked to do in this study?**

Participants will be asked to complete a one-on-one interview with the principal investigator(s). The interview will last approximately 60 minutes, and will be audio recorded. If you do not want the interview recorded, the investigator will take hand-written notes.

**How much time will I spend being in this study?**

Participants will complete a one-time interview that lasts approximately 60 minutes.

**Will being in this study cost us anything?**

This study will not cost anything other than the time required to complete the interview.

**What are the benefits of being in this study?**

There are no direct benefits to be gained by participants in this study. Results from the study will be used to inform the examination of the school choice process for racial/ethnic minorities in the MDiv program.

**What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in this study?**

There are no risk involved in this study. Your identity will remain confidential, and you may decide to discontinue your participation at any time.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

We will not tell anyone you are in this study. You do not have to answer any questions or give us any information that you do not want to.

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**

Names will only be known to the principal investigator. The names will not be used as identifiers in the research in order to ensure confidentiality of the participants. Information from the consent forms and interviews will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Electronic data will be maintained on a password-protected computer. The audio recordings of the interview will be destroyed when the study is complete.

**Do I have to be in the study?**

No – you can refuse to participate in the study. You can also start the study and decide to stop at any time.

**If I don't want to be in the study, are there other choices?**

If you do not want to be in this study, the other choice is to refuse.

**What if new information is learned during the study that might affect my well-being or decision to continue in the study?**

You can tell the researcher at any time whether you want to continue in the study or not.

**What if we have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints?**

If you have questions about the study now, please ask them. If you have questions or concerns later, you can reach Shonda Jones at [redacted] or [redacted]. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact Ms. Myles, The University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, at 205-348-8461.

You may also ask questions, make a suggestion, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at [http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO\\_Welcome.html](http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html). After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online there, or you may ask the researcher for a copy of it. You may also e-mail us at [participantoutreach@ua.edu](mailto:participantoutreach@ua.edu).

**What are my rights as a participant?**

Being in this study is totally voluntary. It is your free choice. You may choose not to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. Not participating or stopping participation will have no effect on your relationships with the [redacted].

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Shonda Jones as a part of research conducted for her dissertation at The University of Alabama. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about the graduate school process of racial/ethnic minority students enrolled in the Master of Divinity program at [redacted]. I will be one of approximately 30 people being interviewed for this research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Investigator

Initial your choice below:

I agree to have my interview audio recorded.

I do not agree to have my interview audio recorded.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 10/24/13  
EXPIRATION DATE: 10/23/14