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African American males' perceptions of a midwestern community college

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES' PERCEPTIONS OF A

MIDWESTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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The educational statistics continue to report dismal persistence and completion rates for male African American community college students. Many scholars have noted the fact that African American males remain further behind all other demographics in college enrollment and completion. In this study, I sought to advance the literature on student engagement and academic success by exploring these students' perceptions of their college-going experience. The purpose of the study was to better understand African American male community college students' perceptions of their academic and social experiences at one midwestern community college.

The theoretical framework for this study was achieved by combining essential components of Involvement and Engagement Theory, Academic and Social Integration Theory, and Encouragement, Family, and Racial Centrality Models. This study used semi-structured in-depth interviews with 27 African American males. Eight significant themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) Campus Environment: faculty, staff, classes, and support, (b) Persistence and graduation, (c) Academic challenges, (d) Academic successes, (e) Personal challenges, (f) Personal successes, (g) Inspiration: personal, family, and colleagues, and (h) Mentors – on and off campus.

This qualitative research study offered narratives from the African American males which described factors they believed impacted their ability and desire to persist at community college. The study findings provided insight into factors students believed guided and supported their academic and student engagement, including the campus environment; faculty, staff, and classes, people, and resources. In this study I sought to provide more understanding of what students believed would help them connect and commit in order to persist and achieve credential completion. The findings served as the basis for recommendations to community college administrators and policy makers and suggestions for future research.

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I am so filled with gratitude that I must, first and foremost, say thank you, God. It is by divine Grace that I found my topic. In my immediate family we had some young men who saw the value of education and others who rejected it. I also heard similar concerns from extended family and friends. I felt compelled to pursue more information about the enrollment persistence and completion issues facing African American males in higher education and more specifically at community colleges.

I acknowledge and thank my son, Robert, for saying my educational journey inspired him to return to school. Kudos, "Bear," for taking me up on my offer, coming to live with me, and completing your certificate. You showed me how to overcome and take it to the next level. Thanks for pushing me to keep going and not to give up. I thank my daughter, Dorrie, for showing me the level of commitment needed to be a scholar. Dorrie, you exemplified "grit" in completing your second master's degree under extreme circumstances. My thanks to Marion, my sis, for being my beacon as she marched our first-generation family forward into higher education.

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They say, “You’ve got to have friends,” and be open to the help the universe sends your way. I’m grateful Cathy convinced me this “going for more education” was a good idea. Many thanks to Donna, Cathy, James, Maeve, and Seamus for believing in me. I appreciate your kindness in helping me to achieve my dream. My thanks to the rock stars, Michael, my transcriber, and Anna and Diane, my editors; your dedicated professionalism helped shape this research study and dissertation at different points along the way. All journeys end with closing one chapter as another chapter begins. Thanks to all of you for helping me to arrive at the beginning of the next chapter of my life story.

DEDICATION

To God be the Glory because first and foremost I must thank God for the vision and fortitude to endure the journey and complete it. This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Marion and Melvin Turner, and my loving grandson Jassan, who enjoyed learning and sharing what he learned with others. Nina and Papa Turner believed in God, their family, and education. They planted the seed of valuing education and I undertook this research hoping to plant that value in the hearts and minds of a new generation. I dedicate this dissertation to the young men in my immediate and extended family. Please embrace education, find your life purpose, and then joyfully live with purpose.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter Page

LIST OF APPENDICES ix

1. INTRODUCTION 1

Community Colleges 4

Statement of the Problem 6

Purpose of the Study 8

Significance of the Study 9

Theoretical Frameworks 10

Definition of Terms 11

Summary Statement 13

2. LITERATURE REVIEW 15

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement 16

Tinto's Theory of Academic and Social Integration 19

The Racial Centrality Model 24

Encouragement and Engagement Models 29

Kuh and Love's Engagement Model 29

Family Support for African American Students 32

Social Barriers to African American Males' Success 41

Arrival to Campus 50

Chapter.....Page

Media Images……..... 51

Anti-Intellectualism and Nihilism……..... 52

Solutions…….. 54

PWIs & HBCUs: Research on African American Students… 55

Open Access: The Community College System…… 62

African American Males in Community Colleges……..... 64

Summary Statement…… 77

3. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES……..... 79

Research Design……..... 80

Basic Qualitative Research……. 81

Sample Selection……..... 81

Participants..... 83

Site Selection 84

Data Collection 86

Interviews..... 88

Member Checks of Transcripts..... 91

Data Analysis..... 91

Trustworthiness and Consistency 95

Themes..... 98

Researcher Bias..... 98

Summary Statement..... 100

Chapter ..... Page

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS 102

History and Overview 102

The Achievers 102

The Brothers 103

Great Thinkers 104

A Collaboration: The Achievers Learning Academy and the Brothers 104

The Achievers 104

The Brothers 110

The Brothers Engaging with the Achievers 111

Themes 113

Campus Environment 113

Persistence and Graduation 119

Academic Challenges 132

Academic Successes 134

Personal Challenges 137

Personal Successes 140

Inspiration: Personal, Family, and Colleagues 142

Mentors–On and Off Campus 145

Summary Statement 149

5. SUMMARIES, CONCLUSIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH 151

Overview of the Study 155

Chapter ..... Page

Discussion and the Research Questions 156

Research Question #1: What are the African American male community college students' perception of their campus environment? 157

Research Question #2: What have been their challenges and successes at community college? 164

Research Question #3: What academic and student engagement support is offered by their institution? 169

Research Question # 4: Who are the mentors available for the African American males? 179

Discussion 184

Limitations of the Study 191

Future Research 191

Implications for Community Colleges 193

Conclusion 198

REFERENCES 200

APPENDICES 212

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix.....Page

A. CONSENT FORM..... 212

B. CONFIDENTIAL DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION/STUDENT PROFILE 214

C. INTERVIEW DISCUSSION TOPICS..... 216

D. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS..... 218

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> Too many of us have been taken by the hype all around us, and perhaps we need to remind ourselves, more often that we are more worthy than *they* know, more worthy than we sometimes believe, worthy enough to create a better life than our culture tells us we deserve. Anger is not necessarily a bad thing provided it doesn't lead you to sabotage yourself; provided you can use it as a shield against all of the negative notions about your ability, against all the voices telling you that you are no one and capable of nothing. Know that you are capable. Know that you can succeed. Know that you are somebody … In the end it may be all that saves us from a world that insists we are not.
>
> -Ellis Cose, *The Envy of the World, 2002*

The alarming absence of African American males on college and university campuses has become a pervasive problem (Carpenter, 2005; Cuyjet, 2006). Scholars have continued to refer to them as endangered and at-risk (Cuyjet, 2006; Gibbs, 1988). In this study I will be looking at African American males in community colleges. Community colleges are the preferred destination for more minority students, and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2015) reported that minority students at community colleges accounted for 52% of the national college enrollment. In its 2015 report, NCES stated that more African American males were enrolled at community colleges than at four-year universities.

The absence of African American males at higher education institutions may be attributed to society's hype, according to *Newsweek* columnist and author Ellis Cose (2002), who

states that African American males must believe that they are worthy and can succeed. It is the only way to produce a positive self-fulfilling prophecy that denies a society that insists otherwise (Cose, 2002). Despite a significant growth in the numbers of people attending college over the last 50 years (due in part to increased financial aid, college federal loan programs and a general positive attitude towards participation in higher education), the number of African American males attending colleges significantly lags behind the general positive trend (Harper & Harris III, 2012).

The continued lower persistence and attainment rates have many reasons. Scholars have documented the types of issues African American males face in elementary and secondary education which sees them disproportionately facing more disciplinary issues that result in extended suspensions, expulsions, and alternative and special education placements (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smith, Griffin, & Cogburn, 2008; Cokley, 2002; Davis, 1994). The challenges of racism in the classroom affect students' self-efficacy about their ability to learn and their social identity (Chavous et al., 2003). This lack of self-confidence in academic ability is based on many of the stereotypes about African American males lacking intellectual skills (hooks, 2004). Unfortunately, these stereotypes influence some educators in their perceptions and expectations of African American male students (hooks, 2004**).** Scholars (Bonner II & Bailey, 2006; Flowers, 2006; Thomas, Townsend, & Belgrave, 2003) state that the students come to the college campus after years of being in educational systems that *did not* make them feel welcome or support their racial or ethnic identity. The problem also affects students' confidence in their ability to succeed academically (Chavous et al., 2003).

How far behind African American males continue to fall is evidenced by several alarming statistics. Based on the last population census, 64% of the African Americans enrolled in college were female, while only 36% were male (United States Census Bureau, 2010). Males' college enrollment decline is further compounded by lower degree completion rates in comparison to African American females**.** In 2009, it was reported that African American females earned 68% of all associate's degrees and 66% of all bachelor's degrees (NCES, 2010). In sharp contrast, African American men earned 32% of all the associate's degrees and 34% of all the bachelor's degrees (NCES, 2010). The differences in completion rates between African American males and females has been documented quantitatively but not qualitatively.

The downward spiral of African American males attending four-year institutions has been well documented. However, less is known about the reasons for these students' disengagement and lower degree completion at the community colleges. African American males at community colleges continue to have lower certificate and degree completion rates than any other student group (NCES, 2015).

Over the last 20 years, the research has described multiple societal barriers, including: disjointed and chaotic home environments, economic disadvantages, and academic failure that many African American males experience (Cuyjet, 2006; Kunjufu, 2001; LaVant, Anderson & Tiggs, 1997; Majors & Billson, 1992). However, researchers over the last decade are noting that African American males are not a homogenous group but come from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, and not all come from crime-ridden areas with low-income, single-parent families (Hendon & Hirt, 2004; Sledge, 2012; Wood, 2011).

Educators are coming to understand that African American males come from different economic levels and ranges of educational and family backgrounds. These students also differ in previous academic preparation, their marital status, and cultural affiliations (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Sledge, 2012; Woods, 2011). More African American males are choosing community colleges than four-year universities to start their postsecondary education, whether coming from stable homes with encouraging families or from economically disadvantaged and chaotic homes (NCES, 2012).

Community Colleges

Community colleges play a significant role in enhancing the educational attainment of a large percentage of the American population (American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), 2015). These institutions have an "open access" policy and lower costs that encourage community learning. They prepare traditional and nontraditional students for transfer to four-year institutions. Upon completion of career certificates and degrees, these institutions also send people directly into the community work force (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). A short overview of the community college history and mission is provided in the literature review.

In 2014, community college students represented 45% of the total undergraduate college population during fall 2014 enrollment in the United States. Of the 2014 fall undergraduate college enrollment, African American students represented 52% of the community college enrollment. While their enrollment numbers continue to lag behind African American females, more African American males are enrolled in community colleges than at four-year colleges

(Cuyjet, 2006; NCES, 2003). African American men are choosing community colleges for the primary access to enter higher education, whether it is to obtain credentials to enter the workforce or general education credits to continue on for a bachelor's degree.

According to the 2015 Digest of Education Statistics, 86,677 associate's degrees were conferred on African American women, in stark comparison to only 45,806 for African American men (NCES, 2015). Based on the gap between post-secondary enrollment and completion for African American males, community college administrators need to better understand the experiences of African American males in order to develop appropriate interventions to enhance their academic success (Cuyjet, 2006; Flowers, 2006; Foster, 2008).

African American males continue to have a presence at community colleges, even though they are not completing at rates comparative to other groups. The African American males are the lowest completion demographic for associate's degrees during 2013-2014 when compared to White males at 239,076, White females at 362,307, Hispanic males at 64,293, and Hispanic females at 102, 827 (NCES, 2015). One of the major issues existing in community colleges is the African American males' lack of engagement, which leads to short-term enrollments, often only two to three semesters before they drop out. A majority of the studies over the last decade employed quantitative surveys addressing institutional retention (Bush, 2004; Glenn, 2001) and in an analysis of data sets focusing on cognitive comparisons of African American and White male students (Flowers, 2006; Redman- Mingo, 2010). Flowers (2006), Harper and Tuckman (2006), and Harper (2005) concur that the literature has not adequately explored community college attendance by African American male students (Flowers). Flowers suggests using qualitative research to gain insights into the African American males' campus environment to

understand the academic and social engagement challenges and supports which impact their ability to persist and graduate (Flowers, 2006).

In a 2006 review of community college research it was noted that higher education's empirical research on community college students is lacking, with the biggest gap being student engagement research (McClenney & Marti, 2006). Student engagement is defined as the amount of time and energy students engage in activities inside and outside of the classroom and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities (Kuh, 2003). The seminal research on involvement and student engagement was conducted by Astin (1984) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), and its impact on student retention confirms the importance of colleges and universities creating a positive academic and social campus experience that increases the students' overall feelings of being connected to their institution.This connection is critical to students' ability to persist through degree completion or transfer to a four-year college. This academic and social integration involves students' interactions with faculty, staff and other students.

Statement of the Problem

The retention and graduation of African American males in higher education continues to be problematic (Cuyjet, 2006; Davis, 1994). Despite gains in admissions through special programs at four-year institutions and the "open access" policies of community colleges, African American males continue to fall further behind all other demographic groups in achieving academic credentials (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007). Scholars (Carpenter, 2005; Cuyjet, 2006; Flowers, 2006) contend that if we continue to see fewer African American

males moving in and through the educational pipeline, then the outcome would be lower educational and economic gains by this group. The lack of economic stability and the resulting implications, such as constant unemployment or under-employment and the inability to sustain themselves or their families would affect African American males and the American society as a whole (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004; Cuyjet, 2006).

In this study I will look at the problems retaining and graduating African American males on a community college campus. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) national data reports that African American males are the least engaged and connected student group on community college campuses. In my study, I interviewed African American men concerning perceptions of their campus and thoughts on the level of support for them on their community college campus. Scholars contend that the copious data regarding interventions suitable for assisting African Americans males at four-year institutions is much less for students at community college (Cuyjet, 2006; Flowers, 2006; McClenney & Marti, 2006). My study intends to add to this body of knowledge.

More research is needed to assess the quality of African American male students' academic and social experiences (Flowers, 2006). Broad research coupled with theoretical perspectives concurs that involvement and engagement lead to more positive outcomes for college students (Astin, 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). The notion of student involvement has received much attention in recent years and has been found to be an important indicator to student success (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2003; Tinto, 2002). Importantly for this study, due to the lack of robust research on African American males at community colleges, much of the research literature used for this study was based on four-year institutional studies.

Scholars assert that empirical studies on higher education that focus on community college students continue to be limited, with even fewer studies focusing on African American males (McClenney & Marti, 2006; Flowers, 2006). Community college administrators are seeking better data to assist in the design and implementation of effective support resources and retention programs in order to improve students' program completion rates. The community college has a crucial role to fulfill in American higher education and its students represent a growing constituency (Pascarella, 1997; Tinto, 2002). Pascarella (1997) challenges student affairs professionals to take a leadership role in helping to enhance the community college student's educational experiences. This study will contribute to the relevant literature by giving voice to the students' perceptions of their experiences and what factors they view as affecting their academic and social engagement. This information can assist in the design of programs to support and retain African American male community college students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to better understand African American male community college students' perceptions of their academic and social experiences at a community college. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the African American male community college students' perceptions of their campus environment?
2. What have been their challenges and successes at community college?
3. What academic and student development support is offered by their institution?
4. Who are the mentors available for African American males?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because this research will offer rich narratives that describe what African American males feel affects their ability and desire to persist at community colleges. In this study, we hear from the students in their own words what can be done to enhance their feelings of belonging. The lack of connectivity to African American males in the community college is a national issue, and more research at the community college will provide information to increase relevant program development in order to meet the students' needs. Additional research is needed that does more than quantify the African American males' experiences at community colleges. It could significantly add to the literature base more information about what students believe will help them connect, and find methods to encourage the students to engage more in classes and campus activities.

The American Association of Community Colleges has reported more African American males start higher education at community college than at four-year schools (AACC, 2015). The community college administrators will need to better understand these students in order to help them be more successful. Gaining a more in-depth understanding of what institutional factors affect the African American male's desires and ability to persist will greatly benefit community colleges not only in retaining students, but in helping those students succeed. The literature about community colleges will benefit from hearing students themselves talk about what triggers their internal motivation to remain in college.

The current literature on African American males at community college campuses is primarily based on quantitative research that used surveys or analysis of data sets (Flowers,

2006; Glenn, 2001; Roberts, 2009), and these studies do not explore the lived experiences of African American males at community colleges. Since the literature review exposed this gap in the community college literature base, it is my intention to add to the literature base by interviewing African American males at a community college.

The theories, models, and concepts selected for the theoretical framework are those that the researcher felt represented appropriate lenses to use in examining African American male students' perceptions of their community college, such as Astin's (1985) theory of involvement, Kuh and Love's (2000) model of student engagement, Tinto's (1997) theory of academic and social engagement, and Chavous et al.'s (2008) model of racial centrality.

Theoretical Frameworks

The guiding theoretical frameworks that serve as the multiple lenses for this study are based on Astin's (1985) theory of involvement, which is significant to this study because of data indicating that African American males at community colleges have low levels of campus involvement. Astin's (1985) theory of involvement states as its basis that student development occurs based upon the amount and quality of energy students devote to their academic and social activities on their campus. This qualitative study could provide insights from the students that explain, from a theoretical perspective, some of the reasons for their lack of involvement. Perspectives that could explain reasons for abandoning school. In turn, relations to the current theoretical perspectives will be analyzed. Tinto's (1993) theory of academic and social engagement and other engagement models, such as Kuh and Love's (2000) model of student engagement, are significant to this study because the Community College Survey of Student

Engagement (CCSSE) indicates through quantitative data that African American males have low levels of student engagement. Adding the students' voices may provide insights into the "whys" for this level of disengagement.

Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff (2003) and Chavous et al.'s (2008) model of racial centrality support the idea that students develop an ethnic and racial ethos through encouragement and bonding in racial connectedness, whether in a cohort, club, or organization. The researchers contend this provides a protection for the self-efficacy of the African American students and results in a better attitude towards academic achievement, while protecting them from racism. This is supported by Harper (2006) and Harper and Quaye (2007). My study could also add to this literature base on racial centrality and peer support. Additionally, my study could add to the theoretical literature by adding more support for family and encouragement models that support Tierney's (1993, 1999) cultural perspective. At the beginning of the Literature Review, each of these will be discussed in detail with rationales for their use with this study.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following operational definitions are used.

Average African American male student – for the purpose of this study, my definition of the average African American male is a student who may work and attend classes, spends time using campus resources, and may engage with clubs or organizations.

Academic and social integration – The formal and informal academic and social experiences on campus that impact students' acceptance of their peers' and faculty's beliefs, as well as the institution's culture that can affect their persistence or departure decisions. It is the

development of social and personal affiliations, as well as sharing the academic and cultural values of the institution (Tinto, 1993).

Cultural capital – Non-financial assets encompassing knowledge, language, and skills that promote a person's social mobility within a social system (Boudrieu, 1986).

Engagement – The amount of time and energy students engage in activities inside and outside of the classroom and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities (Kuh & Love, 2000).

Grit – Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. It entails working strenuously over years, maintaining interest and effort while enduring challenges and failures (Duckworth, Patterson, Matthews, & Kelley, 2007; Perkings- Gough, 2013; Strayhorn, 2013).

HBCU – According to the Higher Education Act of 1965, Historical Black Colleges and Universities are private and public institutions that were established prior to 1964 whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans. They are accredited to carry out this mission.

Involvement – The amount of physical and psychological energy students spends on their academic and social activities on campus, with the focus on what they do to become involved with their campus (Astin, 1999).

Minority – A descriptor for any racial or ethnic group that is non-White, which includes Black, African American, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Native Alaskan (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

Persistence – Continued enrollment in coursework, whether full-time or part-time, in order to complete an academic goal. Persistence is an individual phenomenon, since students,

particularly in community college, do not all plan to complete a degree, and a student can successfully persist without graduating (Reason, 2009).

PWI – Primarily White Institutions are higher education institutions with a larger percentage of White students enrolled compared to other demographics (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Racial Centrality – The centrality dimension of racial identity per Phinney's racial identity model (Phinney, 1990) refers to the extent to which a person normatively defines her/himself with regard to an ethnic group or race. Whereas, the qualitative meaning assigned to their race is racial ideology or regard (Seller & Shelton, 2003).

Socio-Economic Status (SES) - Socioeconomic status is commonly conceptualized as the social standing or class of an individual or group. It is often measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation (http://www.apa.org/topics/socioeconomic-status/).

Summary Statement

The national education statistics have given clear evidence of a gap in the higher education completion rate for African American males compared to all other race and ethnic populations, with African American females completing more credentials in every category from associate's degrees to professional degrees. The background of the problem indicates that African American males have historically faced many obstacles in both society and their education that create barriers to post-secondary success. The research indicates that African American males can be successful, but fewer are remaining in college until completion. The literature has documented many of the challenges African American males face at four-year institutions, but less is known about their experiences at community colleges. With more

African American males entering higher education by starting at community colleges, more qualitative research needs to be done to uncover these students' perceptions of their college experiences. This type of information can help college administrators devise better means to engage them and support their persistence. The purpose of this study is to better understand African American male community college students' perceptions of their academic and social experiences at community college.

The theoretical frameworks for this study use multiple lenses based on Astin's (1985) theory of involvement, Tinto's (1993) theory of academic and social engagement, and Kuh and Love's (2000) engagement model. Additional engagement models included are family, mentors and peer-group support systems. The racial centrality models of Chavous et al. (2008) and Wong et al. (2003) are also discussed, as they pertain to African American male community college students. The significance of the study is that the students' interviews will provide information about their experiences at their community college. They will give their perceptions of the support systems provided by their college and what, if any, effect those systems had on their success.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study is to better understand African American male community college students' perceptions of their academic and social experiences at a community college.The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the male African American community college students' perceptions of their campus environment?
2. What have been their challenges and successes at community college?
3. What academic and student development support is offered by their institution?
4. Who are the mentors available for African American males?

In this chapter, an overview of the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study will be discussed as well as the rationale for its use in this study. The theories of both Astin (1987) and Tinto (1997) are summarized. Additionally, the model of racial centrality (Chavous et al., 2003; Wong et al., 2003) and the model of student engagement (Kuh & Love, 2000), along with a variety of encouragement models, will be discussed.

In addition, a brief examination of the changing social norms that have impacted African American male students is included in order to provide a cultural context. Second, examinations of the sociological and cultural barriers that African American males have encountered over the last 20 years and how these may create barriers to their success are included. Third, a brief review of how family support and encouragement affects African American students'

engagement and persistence is reviewed. Fourth, there is a short overview of studies conducted about African American students at various types of colleges. Finally, the relevant studies about African American males' academic and social engagement at community colleges are reviewed to provide a context for this study.

Astin's Involvement and Engagement Theory

Four Critical Years by Alexander Astin is one of the most-cited books in higher education literature. In an updated version, *What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited,* Astin notes that the basic ideas have not changed since he first wrote about higher education in 1977. Learning, academic success, and retention occur when students have meaningful interactions with faculty in and out of the classroom, supportive and informative interactions with staff, and involvement with student peer groups (Astin, 1993). The model by Astin (1985) contends that student persistence is attached to the students' level of academic and social involvement. He suggests that he devised his theory to end the traditional pedagogical theories, including his own input-environment process-output model that viewed students as "the black box" in which curriculum, support resources, and individualized programs were deposited with hopes of good outcomes.

Astin (1985) posits that the student involvement theory is quite simply the physical time and energy students put into their student experiences. This theory of involvement does not separate the student's development into two separate fields: rather, it focuses on the amount of energy a student expends on any academic or social tasks, whether in or out of the classroom. He

posits that the student involvement theory is more concerned with the processes of behaviors that mold the student's development.

Astin (1985) contends that students simply learn by being involved. He describes student involvement theory as a five-step process:

> (1) a continuous concept, (2) different students will invest different amounts of time and energy towards different objects; (3) involvement requires an investment of both psychological and physical energy; (4) the amount of student development or learning is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement invested by the student; (5) the educational effectiveness of any policy or practice is related to the capacity to induce involvement in students. (pp. 135-136)

Astin (1999) contends that the ability to observe and measure actions based on involvement theory make it more useful in practical application and easier to assess. A basic tenet of Astin's (1999) theory is that highly involved students expend considerable energy on their campus, whether in class or in social activities. In Astin's 1985 theory, the student plays the pivotal role due to the amount of engagement and involvement he or she has with the campus. This theory is applicable to use as a lens for studying African American male community college students, since the study seeks the students' voices in interviews about their perceptions of their experiences on their campus and how those experiences affected their levels of engagement.

Astin's (1985) model is not without its critics. Notable researcher Terenzini (1987) questioned whether Astin's involvement theory was a theory or a model. Terenzini (1987) states that Astin (1977, 1985) offers a principle that fails to describe the behaviors or phenomena being predicted, the variables, or even the general change that is expected to occur. He questioned if Astin's "involvement proposition" would prove useful to researchers (Terenzini, 1987). This involvement theory differs from Astin's earlier "input-environment-output" (I-E-O) model

(Pascarella, 1999, p. 50), in which the student was passively developed by college programs and faculty. The input-environment-output model considered the student inputs of background, demographics, and previous experiences being affected by exposure to the college's institutional environment with its support and new experiences. This hopefully resulted in students who would be leaving college with increased knowledge, new characteristics, and new attitudes. This model did not look at the student's level of energy invested in any of the activities within the institutional environment.

Astin's (1985) involvement theory has been used extensively in research on student academic and co-curricular activities (Hernandez, Hogan, Hathaway & Lowell, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Some concerns have been raised about assessing student involvement and how it is used and applied mostly to traditional-age students, instead of the full spectrum of college students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). By 2005, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reaffirmed the findings of Astin (1985) by stating that college success was based on individual student effort and involvement in curricular and co-curricular offerings on a campus, and, they also noted, the total effect is influenced by the campus itself. Involvement theory has proven useful for researchers and practitioners because it advances one of Astin's fundamental truths, that learning experiences, whether in or out of a class, pay off based on the time and energy invested in them. Researchers continue to identify student involvement as a link to almost every positive college outcome (Harper & Harris, 2012; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Vincent Tinto (2008), the seminal author on student academic and social integration, agrees that the research does support the link between positive student outcomes and student involvement (Astin, 1984, 1993).

Tinto's Theory of Academic and Social Integration

Most of the persistence and retention research has been based on the retention model of Vincent Tinto (1993, 1997), whose premise for attrition stated that students arrive to college with various backgrounds and characteristics that impact the students' level of commitment to their goals and institution. He contends that a student's college entry experiences, in conjunction with the student's initial commitment to the institution and to graduation, influence the decision to leave college.

Tinto's (1993) interactionalist model of student departure has become one of the most-cited theories regarding student departure. Tinto's model conceptualized that students' retention is determined by the depth and magnitude of the students' academic and social experiences in college. His theory also suggests that early and continuous institutional commitment affects both academic and social integration within the institution, and it states that these factors are important to college student retention (Tinto, 1993). Academic experiences were defined by Tinto (1993) as those including, but not limited to, academic experiences on campus that benefit cognitive development and support a student's academic motivation to enhance his or her pursuit of academic tasks. This is in contrast to social integration experiences that help connect students to their campus environment, aid in their student development process, and enhance their general satisfaction with their college (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (1993) suggests that students will commit to their higher education institutions when they feel that the institutions are providing dedicated faculty and staff who are committed to them and their success. Tinto's original model was based on traditional-aged four-year college

students. In response to criticism from researchers such as Tierney (1992), he revised his study (1997) to include non-traditional-aged students and two-year community college students. Tinto (1997) used a mixed-methods study at one community college to determine the effectiveness of using learning communities and collaborative learning strategies. The use of the learning communities and collaborative learning programs helped the non-traditional students in their academic integration and increased the bond to their community college (Tinto, 1997). These types of experiences are helpful for colleges with a higher percentage of students having multiple obligations outside of campus life (Tinto, 1997).

Tinto (2002) noted the increase in lower-income students starting college at a two-year versus a four-year institution. He also called attention to the fact that many of these students are not only lower income, but underprepared. He advocates for academic support that is not marginalized but central to their studies, such as basic skills learning communities. He suggests that learning communities provide the much-needed supplemental support in the classrooms because so many of these higher risk, developmental, and first-generation students do not stay on campus to use the resources and tutoring centers due to work and other responsibilities (Tinto, 2002).

At a 2002 conference focusing on student persistence and success in postsecondary education, Tinto (2002) stated that institutions could improve student persistence by focusing on five institutional conditions during the critical first year of college. Tinto (2002) believed that the emphasis here is on the conditions in which the students are placed and not the attributes of the students themselves. He noted that extensive research has already identified the institutional conditions that best promote student persistence, especially during the critical first year of

college. They are: level of expectation, accurate advice, guided support, involvement, and learning. Tinto (2002) points out that high expectations lead to student success. He also reminds us that students need clear, consistent information about institutional requirements and adequate academic, social, and personal support. Tinto agrees with Satin (1984, 1993) that students are more likely to persist and graduate when they are involved as valued members of their institution with opportunities for frequent, quality contact with faculty, staff, and other students. The importance of this, he says, does not change from institution type whether rural or urban, large or small, two-year or four-year college or university. Simply put, involvement matters, especially during the first year of college, because it is then that the students' attachments are most tenuous and the institution's pull is the weakest (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Terenzini (1987) states that the longitudinal model used to describe the college student attrition process shows strong similarity to the Astin (1977, 1985) model. However, Terenzini (1987) contends that Tinto's model remains a more explicit model of institutional impact that points to descriptions of the types of academic skills and personal characteristics student possess as they enter college, the effect of institutional interactions and the modifications to students' level of institutional commitment. Although Tinto (1987) focused on the college attrition process, in a similar manner as Astin (1985), it is the earlier version of his model (Tinto, 1975) with its more theoretical structure (Metz, 2004-2005) that yielded more use by researchers in investigating student outcomes and by administrators seeking to design programs to enhance student growth (Terenzini, 1987).

Tinto (1987) revised his earlier persistence model after criticism from researchers such as Pascarella (1997) and Terenzini (1997). Despite revising his theory of persistence, his model

continued to be the subject of critique, due to its focus on traditional-age student populations and its lack of attention to racial or ethnic differences (Metz, 2004). Tierney (1999) took exception to a significant component of Tinto's (1993) academic and social integration theory. He posits that Tinto's notion that students needed to disassociate from their families and communities in order to properly bond with their college was not applicable to minority students. Tierney (1999) contends that Tinto's (1993) theory was intended for majority-culture students who were progressing within a culture as opposed to assimilating from one culture to another. Over the year, many studies (Biel, Reisen, Zea & Caplan, 1999; Hausmann, et al., 2007; & Museus, 2008) have been conducted based on the Tinto model for integration or student departure, and most have focused on traditional-aged White students at four-year residential institutions.

Tinto (2002) stated that enough research has been produced for institutional leaders to understand how they can positively affect first year students' persistence. He emphasized that, if used, the five institutional conditions could improve students' persistence regardless of their attributes. He also added that students needed adequate academic and personal support to enhance their involvement and campus engagement.

Scholars from the research literature on African American family support (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Palmer, Davis, & Maramba, 2011; Sledge, 2012) and others (Chavous et al., 2008; Phinney, 1990; & Wong et al., 2003) note that family influences a student's values about learning and college. Herndon and Hirt (2004) and Palmer et al. (2011) concur with the coping effectiveness concept of ethnic identity that traces its roots to Jean Phinney (1990), whose model of ethnic identity contends that a minority adolescent's ethnic identity is a crucial factor in the development of a positive self-concept. What a person learns from his/her family about his/her

culture and community is the basis of this construct. Phinney developed her model after reviewing 70 different ethnic identity models published since 1972.

Phinney (1990) and Cokley (2007, p. 225) define ethnic identity as "the subjective sense of ethnic group membership that involves self-labeling, sense of belonging, preference for the group … and involvement in ethnic group activities." Similarly, racial identity has been identified as "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group (Helms, 1990, p. 3). Differences of opinion still continue regarding to what degree ethnic and racial identity exist as separate constructs (Cross & Strauss, 1998; Helms, 1990). The definitions of the two constructs do reflect a focus on shared history, values, and heritage.

Two psychological constructs, encouragement and ethnicity, are considered central to success for African American students. Encouragement includes feeling good about one's self and other people while having the willingness to learn and live (Dagley, Lynn, Phelps, & Tranakos-Howe 2001). Dagley et al.'s 2001 study, which used Adler's Encouragement Scale, examined the relationship between encouragement and ethnicity and points out that encouragement includes offering support systems and groups that can be effective in enhancing ethnic pride and, in effect, encouraging African American students (Dagley et al., 2001).

In the behavior and social science literature, racial and ethnic identity theory has been evaluated (Cross & Strauss, 1998; Helms, 1990; Phinney, Madden & Ong, 2003) for its stress buffering effects when used as a coping mechanism against racism in the behavioral science and sociological literature. A well-developed racial/ethnic identity can protect a targeted individual from injuries of self-esteem or distress (Seller & Shelton, 2003). The racial centrality model

based on the Phinney (1990) ethnic identity theory makes the case for how racial pride and connectivity protects minority students from racial discrimination.

In the next section, an overview is provided of the racial centrality model. The implications for African American students' college success or lack of it are discussed in several studies in the next section. Wong et al. (2003) and Chavous et al. (2008) have submitted research findings saying strong racial and ethnic identity supports minorities in their academic achievements. Harper and Tuckman's (2006) study of 9th and 12th graders replicated three of the four racial identity profile groups identified by Chavous et al. (2003). Additionally, among the 9th and 12th grade students, students in the *Alienated* category achieved significantly higher grade-point averages than did the *Idealized* students.

The Racial Centrality Model

In a study of African American middle school students from a wide socioeconomic range, Wong et al. (2003) posited that adolescents who had a strong racial identity were buffered from the effects of racial discrimination and better able to achieve, despite the barriers facing them. The researchers point to prior research by Phinney and Chavira (1995) indicating that African American families socialized their children by emphasizing education and working harder than other ethnic groups while discussing issues of racism. Wong et al. (2003) studied over 1,400 students and their families in 23 Maryland County junior high schools. Their findings concluded that race and ethnicity could serve as a positive and protective role in the lives of African American students.

Chavous et al. (2008) define racial centrality as the level of connection or relationship one has to their racial group, which includes gender. This is used to define ones' self-concepts and attitude toward academic engagement and accomplishment. This study added gender as a variable to the previous work by Wong et al. (2003). Chavous et al. (2008) noted that both gender and socioeconomic status mattered in the adolescent African American males' level of racial centrality when compared to African American females. Other scholars have stated that African American males are often raised in female-led single-family homes, which may contribute to behavior issues and living in a lower socioeconomic class. These factors result in both lower self-esteem and lower racial centrality (Hall & Rowan, 2001 & LaVant et al., 1997).

Chavous et al. (2008) agreed with Seller and Shelton (2003) that racial connectedness provided a protection for the self-efficacy of the African American students and resulted in a compensatory attitude of higher functioning adjustment and academic achievement. They contend that their examination supports that strongly identifying with being Black may enhance African American males' ability to maintain their academic values even as they face being devalued in a discriminatory educational environment. Afrocentric values are all positive strengths that lead to both a higher self-esteem and stronger group identification among African American children (Thomas et al., 2003). These values are also associated with African American children attaining positive psychological adjustments in school settings. Chavous et al. (2003) extended the applicability of racial identity profiles as they addressed their relation to academic beliefs, performance, and later attainment. Based upon three of the subscales of the Multi-Dimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI), the authors identified four Black racial identity clusters. The *Idealized* cluster is characterized by high levels of racial centrality, both

public and private regard. The second racial profile is the *Alienated* racial identity profile, which is characterized by low levels of racial centrality, and low levels of public and private regard.

Some scholars are beginning to assess how racial centrality impacts African American adolescents' views of themselves and their ability to achieve academically (Chavous, 2003; Phinney, 1990; Thomas, et al., 2003; Wong et al. 2003). Recent studies by Chavous et al. (2008) and Wong et al. (2003) have begun to separate the minority student population and examine the issue by gender as well as race/ethnicity. Although Chavous et al. (2003) were praised for providing insight into the examination of Black racial identity and its relation to academic belief and outcomes, Harper and Tuckman (2006) believe that Chavous and her colleagues overlooked some important considerations in their examination. They note that Chavous and her colleagues had a limited sample of only 12th grade students who obtained less than 3.0 grade-point averages and were from a lower socioeconomic status (SES). While this did provide a fairly large sample, the authors contend that it did not result in a diverse sample across age and levels of academic achievement representative of the large urban setting for the study's school district. Cokley (2007) agrees with Phinney (1990) that researchers should use methods and designs that allow for fluctuations of ethnic identity over time. He reminds us that Phinney (1990) is correct in noting the study of ethnic identity is framed in its changing nature over time and context.

Several studies (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Chavous et al., 2003; & Wong et al., 2003) examined the influences of school racial discrimination and racial identity to see how they serve as predictors of academic outcomes for African American adolescents. A variety of studies (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Chavous et al., 2003; & Wong et al., 2003) provide

substantial evidence that African American adolescents experience discrimination from teachers and peers. As a result of this discrimination, these students face potential damage to their academic motivation, self-esteem, and mental health. Additional damage from the perceived discrimination includes poor behavior, developing a poorer self-image, and developing relationships with friends who possess fewer positive qualities. Harper and Tuckman's (2006) study found that, based on findings of Chavous et al. (2003), it was expected that there would be significant differences between racial profile groups with respect to grade-point averages. Specifically, it was thought that the Idealized students would outperform students of any other racial identity group. Instead, in their study, it was the opposite, and the Alienated students did better than the Idealized students. Alienated students expressed lower than average levels of racial centrality, which may mean they disassociated themselves from those groups that they perceive as negative. This may also support the idea of students who are academically successful when they remove themselves from prior groups of people who may no longer share their values or academic aspirations.

Phinney (1990) and Cokley (2002) state that most ethnic and racial identity models are based on several items, including how people share their culture, language, religion, and geographic area. The manner in which people share these items can create feelings of connectivity and loyalty. They contend that this explains how people come to understand the implications of their ethnicity and what impact this has on individual life choices. African American males and other minority students should find membership in at least one or more subcultures (ethnic organizations on campus), if they are to persist and be successful in attending a primarily White Institution (PWI).

Cokley (2002), Phinney (1990), and Wong et al. (2003) support connectivity with one's group and taking pride in this shared membership. This position supports the findings of Tierney (1992, 1999), who disagreed with Tinto's theory that students coming from incongruent cultures, those cultures of origin that are different from the culture of immersion at a primarily White Institution (PWI), needed to sever all ties with the culture of origin in order to assimilate the values and mores of the new culture. Museus (2008) describes this cultural dissonance as the tension students feel as a result of the incongruence of their cultural meaning-making system and new information encountered. Kuh and Love (2000) asserted that students from diverse precollege environments had lower levels of incongruence and made better transitions to the predominately White culture at a PWI. They also asserted that the higher levels of incongruence between a student's culture of origin and the culture of immersion at the postsecondary level increased the likelihood of the student leaving the institution.

Tierney (1992, 1999) disagrees with Tinto (1993) regarding students entering college needing to face full immersion and severing all ties with their cultural origin in order to adopt the values and mores of the new culture. This severing of cultural identity is an unfair burden requested of students in order to assimilate to the dominant culture, which research has determined to be counterproductive (Museus, 2008; Tierney, 1999).

According to Tierney (1992), there are gaps in the literature that could benefit from additional research, and Tierney suggests that it would be beneficial to examine the role of various cultural factors or other cultural frameworks in shaping outcomes. The author suggests that this would expand on his limited look at only one cultural variable. Additional gaps in the literature note few studies ask African American male students and graduates their perceptions of

what has contributed to their resiliency and persistence. These types of studies have serious implications for helping student affairs/services professionals devise better support systems. Many of the issues that affect African American male students' resiliency and persistence can be traced to social, cultural, and educational challenges in their backgrounds.

Engagement and Encouragement Models

Kuh and Love's Engagement Model

The engagement concept was influenced by involvement theory (Astin, 1985), the quality of effort measures (Pace, 1980), and indicators of good practice in undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamon, 1987). Engagement, as described by Kuh (2003), equals the time and effort students put into their studies and other activities and the infrastructure that is in place to assist student learning (Kuh, 2003). Student engagement can be viewed as a two-element concept: what the students do and what the institution does. Kuh (2003) explained that student engagement was not an extension of involvement, but was developed as a means of expressing the more explicit link between student behaviors and effective educational practices.

Kuh and Love's (2000) perspective on student departure offered an alternative to Tinto's student integration theory, which they outlined in a set of propositions that described the role a campus culture plays in a student's persistence. Kuh and Love (2000) proposed that persistence is inversely related to the students' pre-college culture and cultures of immersion in the campus cultures. Museus (2008) concurs with their reasoning that students either acclimate, if they come from cultures incongruent with the dominate culture, or seek membership in one or more subcultures in order to increase the ability to be successful.

The creation of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) by George Kuh was the project that engendered the concept of engagement. The development of this nationally used higher education student assessment instrument was guided by Kuh, who led a design team of research scholars and practitioners including Alexander Astin, Arthur Chickering, John Gardner, and C. Robert Pace. This instrument is now used nationally at universities to survey students about their levels of engagement, and another version, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), is used at community colleges.

The literature indicates that, nationally, African American males have the lowest rate of engagement on college campuses (Cuyjet, 2006; Foster, 2008). Yet, most of the literature on African American males at community college campuses is primarily quantitative research that used surveys or analysis of data sets. The literature provides the data about the males' lack of engagement, but the reasons for it remain undiscussed. The literature on African American males at community colleges is beginning to increase, but these voices need to be included in the literature base. The rich context of the individual interviews in my study may provide some reasons for the ongoing lack of campus engagement.

Engagement has a direct link to desired educational process and emphasizes actions that institutions can take to encourage student interactions on campus in and out of the classroom (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009, p. 414). African American students' level of campus engagement can be influenced by institutional support and family encouragement, according to the studies of Herndon and Hirt (2004) and Palmer et al. (2011). The key is the creation of a friendly, welcoming environment for students.

This is supported in additional research (Herndon & Hirt, 2004, p. 505; Museus, 2008) regarding membership in subcultures such as ethnic and racial student clubs and organizations. These memberships allow for student development growth, peer mentoring, and guidance for accessing assistance within the dominant campus culture. The role models from organization advisors and peer members become even more important for African American males attending PWIs. This is due to the scarcity in numbers of African American males in higher education who could serve as role models (Museus, 2008). The students also need family and community support to help them build campus networks to support their success (Museus, 2008). The students' families and community supporters can assist the students in developing a trust in the campus community and its resources. Another factor that can enhance students' persistence and levels of success is their ability to cope as a minority in a PWI. Coping mechanisms and approaches are part of the racial socialization that families provide their children to aid them in dealing with the stressors of racism in the United States.

Adler (1931) described encouragement as the extent to which one feels good about him- or herself and others while feeling up to the tasks of learning and living. He summarizes this as individuals having the courage and resiliency to meet the challenges of daily living, while possessing feelings of adequacy, competence, and the feeling of being connected to others. Adler's model of a fully functioning person emphasizes the striving to belong and contributing to the social group. Encouragement focuses on the importance of accepting and valuing people just for being who they are, which gives them a sense of belonging. This idea of encouragement is at the foundation of the constructs that Dagley et al. (2001) consider essential to the success of African American students.

Dagley et al. (2001) point to the psychological constructs of encouragement and ethnicity as important factors in the success of African American students. Encouragement includes, according to Dagley et al. (2001), feeling good about one's self and other people while having the willingness to learn and live. Their study, which used Adler's Encouragement Scale, examined the relationship between encouragement and ethnicity. Dagley et al. (2001) point out that encouragement includes offering support systems and groups that can be effective in enhancing ethnic pride and, in effect, encouraging African American students (Dagley et al., 2001). These two constructs of encouragement and ethnicity are at the center of much of the research on family, sense of belonging, and mentor support of African American students.

Family Support for African American Students

Other engagement and encouragement research focuses on family and mentors. Museus (2008) concurred with Herndon and Hirt (2004) that parental and peer support increased African American students' sense of belonging and ability to persist. Sledge (2012) provided a review of the literature on family support for African American students and discussed several studies that indicated that family support, whether immediate or extended support, can be critical to African American students' college success. The research also indicates that fictive kin, who are not family, such as church family, neighbors, or friends, are also part of this support network and also have a positive impact on a student's college persistence and his or her psychological well-being.

Two of the studies that Sledge (2012) reviewed as reporting these outcomes were from Herndon and Hirt (2004), who conducted research on African American students and their

families at two North Atlantic area primarily White Institutions (PWIs), and Palmer et al. (2011), who conducted a similar study at a Historical Black College or University (HBCU). The findings indicated implications for African American college students, their families, and college personnel. The study by Herndon and Hirt (2004) indicated that precollege stages were influenced by family (immediate, extended, or fictive), views on higher education, perceptions of race and resiliency, and motivation to succeed. In their findings, Herndon and Hirt (2004) also noted that family and friends could influence their students during the early college years to develop a network of friends, religious support, and campus connections.

Finally, Herndon and Hirt (2004) described mentoring from recent grads or upper classmen as a proactive means for developing a sense of community and campus engagement among African American students. The mentoring allowed the upper classmen and recent grads a sense of fulfillment by giving back to their college community, and it provided guidance and community for the new students. They described the encouragement given by the mentoring from the older students as significant in enhancing the campus engagement of the younger students. The authors described the limitations of this study being inherent to the nature of it being a qualitative study. They described the study using qualitative research methods that do not enable broad generalizations about the results, since only a small sample is represented. The study participants were 20 African American university seniors and their families from a large rural and an urban PWI in the North Atlantic area. The researchers also noted that the questions used in their interviews could have been misinterpreted and that this could be another limitation to the study.

The transition to college is a challenging event for any student, even with the support of their institution. All students, including African American students, are expected to develop the skills to navigate the college environment (Cuyjet, 2006; Deil-Amen, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)**.** Financial, academic, and student development services are offered through a wide variety of campus departments and student support services. Student clubs, organizations, and mentoring or peer mentoring programs offer African American students the opportunity to form a sense of community and bonding with fellow students.

Hausmann et al. (2007) posit that a student's sense of belonging could have an effect on retention. They suggested that many studies based on Tinto (1987, 1993) and Astin (1984) consider "belonging" as a part of the overall construct that examines institutional fit, while their 2007 study sought to examine it as a separate construct. The study surveyed African American and White first-year students three times over the academic year. Students were randomly assigned to groups in which they were either given an intervention to enhance their feelings of belonging or assigned to one or two control groups.

While their findings concluded that a sense of belonging at the beginning of the academic year was evident, it appears that it did not contribute to the development of commitment over the course of the year (Hausmann et al., 2007). However, Hausmann et al. (2007) found two differences among the African American and White students regarding their first year and sense of belonging. They determined that the relationship between the effect of parental support and sense of belonging at the beginning of the year was strong for all students, but it was especially strong for African American students. The students show gains in their academic and social integration when given the opportunity to strengthen their ethnic pride and self-esteem through

inclusive diversity in their classroom curriculum and extra-curricular activities (Hausmann, et al., 2007).

African American students seek advice, and this required emotional support from their family and friends more than through their campus, especially during their first year (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Palmer et al., 2011). African American college students, whether they are attending a PWI or an HBCU, are very likely to turn to their family support system for advice and encouragement (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Palmer et al., 2011; Sledge, 2012). The African American students are comfortable asking those whom they trust, their family and friends, for advice about a variety of their college issues. These issues can vary from academic topics to assimilation issues and social problems with friends or roommates. Students described their parents as friends and people they trust to help them solve their problems (Sledge, 2012). Students described their family-and-friends supports as being friendly and at times stern. Students stated that their family and friends offered words of encouragement, prayers, and straight talk when it was most needed (Herndon & Moore, 2002; Palmer et al., 2011).

In a recent review of the literature on African American family support of their students, Sledge (2012) discusses recent research by Guiffrida (2006) that supports Tierney (1992) in stating that minority students need their family support before and throughout their college experience. Guiffrida (2006) calls for a shift in Tinto's theory, which previously called for new students disengaging from family in order to bond with their college. The research is further supported by Herndon and Hirt's (2006) study at two PWIs and by Palmer et al. (2011) at an HBCU, which indicated the significance of family support, whether immediate or extended family, being critical to African American students' college success. The research also indicated

that this support and encouragement has a positive impact on students' college persistence and psychological well-being. They suggested involving families in orientation information and updates on college expectations. This type of assistance provided first- generation families with a knowledge base to encourage and support their students with appropriate information.

Educators are coming to realize that African American males are not a homogenous monolithic group, nor are their families. The level of education and the socioeconomic status (SES) among the Black family, whether an intact two-person couple or a single mother, varies from having high school diplomas to advanced degrees. This also means the families' SES varies from low-income to upper middle-class. Additionally, the recent research (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Palmer et al., 2011) noted that African American students come from a broad range of family structures. These families could consist of a core family who lives with extended family to two-parent families that live in lower or upper middle-class city neighborhoods or a suburban area. Additionally, many students reported being raised by supportive grandparents who may or may not have a college education, but who offer them encouragement to "do their best" and "make the family proud." In the literature review, Sledge (2012) also noted that the major influence of the fathers was the amount of time the father devoted to spending time and interacting with his children, whether or not he lived at home. She also noted that multiple studies commented on the need for more role models for African American males when they come from single-parent homes. However, in both Herndon and Hirt (2004) and Palmer et al.'s (2011) studies, students directed the researchers to the female family members even in two-parent homes.

The current literature on African American family support of their students (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Palmer et al., 2011; Sledge, 2012) agrees with other scholars (Chavous 2008; Phinney, 1999; Wong et al., 2003) that the family influences the student's values about learning and college. A student's socialization about race and experiences with discrimination are influenced by the family's views. The scholars agree that family involvement and support before and during college are critical factors for students to have successful college outcomes. Research also indicates that ethnic identity development is related to feeling encouraged about having a sense of pride and a sense of one's place in the world (Dagley et al., 2001). Some African American male students do not have the strong racial socialization that enhances their ethnic identity development due to challenges in their backgrounds. It has been shown that lack of parental support or a history of parental criminality inhibits racial socialization and ethnic identity development in dysfunctional families.

Many of the issues that affect African American male students' resiliency and persistence can be traced to social, cultural, and educational challenges in their backgrounds. Over the last two decades, researchers have examined and documented the sociological and economic barriers affecting the academic achievements of students of color and first-generation college students.

In a longitudinal study, Stewart (2006) analyzed national data to look at family and individual predictors of educational success. Stewart (2006) noted that a number of studies had suggested that parents of higher socioeconomic status (SES) were more involved in their children's education than parents in lower SES and this culminated in their children having higher achievement and more positive attitudes about school. Past research, such as the *Coleman*

Report, stated that the single biggest factor that affected children's academic achievement was the educational and social background of the children's family (Coleman et al., 1996).

Conversely, Stewart (2006) reported that some studies that investigated the influence of socioeconomic status (SES) on African American students' achievement and attainment found that the socioeconomic status of the families explained little of the variations in achievement. Slaughter and Epps (1987) reported that some studies of African American families had no relationship with achievement. Their findings suggested that much of the family influence on minority high school students' grades is indirect and that SES may affect amount of activities, beliefs, and perceptions about achievement. Studies that used class rank as an achievement indicator have found SES unrelated to African American students' academic performance. Positive learning environments can exist in some African American homes with low SES. A family's level of involvement in their children's education positively affects the students' achievements (Stewart, 2006).

It is crucial to identify variables that influence the academic achievement of African American students. The family can be a positive factor that influences students to attend postsecondary education. Those families in which the parents did not attend college probably should be part of the educational plan to inform them, as well as their students, about the importance of taking rigorous courses, taking more math and science, and preparing for college testing and enrollment processes. The family can also play a vital role by preparing their students for the societal challenges minorities still face in this country. The African American family can offer support for academic achievement and instill values and beliefs in their children that will help them persevere through difficult times to reach their goals.

Strong families who are authoritarian in setting moral standards, values, and beliefs help to develop more confident and secure children. These children will experience less conflict in their relationships (Parade, Leerkes, & Blankson, 2010). Conversely, children who grow up in less secure family environments with fewer attachments are more likely to engage in unhealthy relationships. The family can help sustain African American students living and dealing with the stress of racism on predominately White college campuses. In a recent study, the scholars found a correlation between African American students' parental attachment and the students' level of social anxiety and ability to make friends. The strong family connection can help buffer "racial" negatives and give African American students a positive racial identity to enhance minority students' well-being (Parade et al., 2010). Family support profoundly affects minority students by being either positive, non-involved, or negative (Herndon & Moore, 2002).

Positive involvement suggests that the family is actively involved in their student's development and talks to their student about interests and goals. The family could discuss career options and what courses are needed to support a major leading to the desired career goal. This helps to provide support and encouragement to the student. Family members and fictive kin need to familiarize themselves with the resources available to their students so they can direct them to the appropriate help should problems arise. The family should help encourage them to participate in local and federal programs that could enhance their academic goals (Herndon & Moore, 2002).

Non-involvement is characterized by parents' being indifferent or having a hand-off approach to their students' academic plans and goals. These are often parents who did not go to college and are not sure of how to offer assistance or support to their students. They may be

fearful of giving their students wrong information. African American parents often want to help their college-going student but feel inadequate to offer assistance because they don't have the information or know-how to direct their student to the appropriate department or contact. Herndon and Moore (2002) suggest that counselors, orientation, and first-year programs can provide more information to parents to help them support their children during their transition to college, and feeling better equipped may remove some of their doubt and indifference.

Negative involvement pertains to over-involved-parents pushing their students towards certain college majors or career goals, based on their own desires, with little regard for the student's interests or goals. On the other extreme are parents who don't help their student overcome homesickness but instead encourage them to visit home often or every weekend. This causes the student separation anxiety and creates resistance to assimilating to the campus. Other negative involvement is when parents take advantage of students who live at home to take care of siblings or other family members and demand that their students give up study time to engage in family events. These negative involvements may require the student to stay away from the parents in order to successfully assimilate and engage in their new culture on campus (Herndon & Moore, 2002).

Social Barriers to African American Males' Success

This section will discuss the literature pertaining to the social, educational, and cultural barriers facing African American men. Over the past 20 years, research focusing on the plight of at-risk and first-generation students, and students of color, has documented the sociological barriers and academic challenges of these students as an aggregate group without using gender as

a variable (Cooley, Cornell, & Lee, 1991; Furr & Elling-Theodore, 2002; & Pascarella & Terenenzi, 2005).

Earlier research (Cokley, 2002; Cross & Slater, 2000; Davis, 1994) focused on concerns regarding the social barriers to college success for African American students. These studies provided insight into the plight of minority, at-risk, and first-generation students and documented the sociological barriers and academic challenges of these students, including racism within the education setting, as noted by Chavous et al. (2008), and underdeveloped academic preparation.

Other scholars sought to examine the impact on African American males in relationship to cultural identity, disengagement from campus life, and dissatisfaction with college experiences (Braxton, 2000; Bush, 2004; Chavous et al., 2003). The last decade of research (Bonner II & Bailey, 2006; Flowers, 2006; Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004) provides evidence to support earlier research that African American males are capable of overcoming environmental barriers to successfully matriculate through higher education when given well-developed and formalized support systems (Cooley et al., 1991; LaVant et al., 1997). What types of societal barriers have many African American males encountered that causes them to need more academic and social support to successfully matriculate in higher education?

One of the societal barriers challenging many minority and/or low-income students is being a first-generation college student. A discussion of first-generation college students is really a discussion about their families and their level of education. A 2010 study by the Department of Education reports that 50% of the national college population, consisting of both four-year and two-year students, are now first-generation students based on the federal TRIO Program's and

PELL Institute Report's definitions. These students' parents are those whose education ended after completing high school or some college. The federal government's operating definition of first-generation is based on parents' education ending after high school. However, in the higher education community, there is no one definition that is used for this demographic, thereby creating confusion. The National Center for Education Statistics often supports scholarly research, and in some of their supported studies, the definition varies from parents having never attended college, to some college, to a bachelor's degree or higher (Davis, 2010). Davis also points out that at many four-year universities a student can claim first-generation status if neither parent has completed a bachelor's degree or higher, so this includes parents with an associate's degree.

In 2010, NCES's Office of Education Research and Improvement published a report on the condition of access, persistence, and attainment specific to students whose parents did not go to college, which also was the title of the report. Choy (2001) states that the data indicates that the likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education is strongly related to the parents' education, even when other factors are taken into consideration, indicating that the level of the parents' education has a direct correlation to the likelihood of their children enrolling in post-secondary education. In 1992 high school graduates whose parents did not go to college, only 59% of the students had enrolled in some type of postsecondary education. By 1994, the postsecondary enrollment rate increased to 75% among those whose parents had some college and to 93% among those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree (Choy, 2001, p. 7). Parents' education was one of many factors linked to higher post-secondary enrollment. Students' decisions to enroll in postsecondary education are influenced by a variety of factors,

including family income, educational expectations, parental involvement, and influences from their peers (Choy, 2001).

The demographics makeup of first-generation students described in a 2010 NCES report used the "high school diploma" definition for parents' education and broke out the educational levels of the first-generation students based on race and ethnicity. Minority groups made up the largest demographic group of students with parents having high school diplomas or less, including 48.5% Hispanic and Latino students and 45% of African American students. The Asian population reported 32% of parents having only a high school diploma or less, while Native Americans were slightly higher at 35%. Meanwhile, students who identified as Caucasian had only 28% of the population with parents having high school diplomas or less. The numbers continue to be higher for minorities, especially Latino and African Americans students, but the overall statistics indicate the trend toward more first-generation students in general attending colleges.

As discussed earlier, the NCES data indicates that more minority students are entering college, with the numbers doubling since the 1970s, but the attainment of credentials continues to be lagging. Students whose parents' education ended at a high school diploma continue to face disadvantages in higher education access, persistence, and credential attainment according to a number of studies reported through the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2010). The data sets from the 2003-2004 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) and the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) study supported the Pell Institute Report on first-generation students.

The National Student Aid Study examines how students and their families pay for postsecondary education at all types of institutions including two-year, four-year public, as well as private and for-profit. This study includes a representative sample of students at all types of institutions and at all levels from undergraduate to graduate and first professional degrees. The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) includes data on amounts and types of aid received, and college costs, while also examining patterns of work, study hours, and enrollment.

The Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) study is a longitudinal study that follows those who have enrolled in a post-secondary institution. Students are surveyed at the beginning of year one of college and then three and six years later. The survey asks students about their college experiences, their persistence, and attainment levels, and concludes with questions about post college employment. The BPS data in the 2008 Pell Institute Report comes from the most recent study, which was based on students who entered post-secondary education in 1995-1996 and followed them through 2001-2002. The BPS sample was drawn from first-time undergraduates participating in the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS 1996) study.

Davis (2010) does not agree that low-income equals first-–generation, noting that the Pell Institute Report used low-income as part of its definition of first-generation students. The report stated that low-income and first-generation students were disproportionately ethnic and racial minorities with lower levels of academic preparation. Some of the other characteristics of first-generation students the report included were: they often receive less financial support from their families, had a delay of enrollment after high school, had non-continuous college enrollment and had multiple outside obligations, such as full-time work or their own families to

support. The report concluded, “Research has shown that these factors lower students’ chances of persisting to graduation” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 3).

Based on the data sets in the Pell report, the authors contend that many first-generation students tend to be older or not receiving financial support from their families. They also state that the students provide most of the finances for their own education. This situation causes many of these students to use loans, as well as the free grants to cover the higher costs for postsecondary education (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Often, to cover additional living costs, many of these students work part-time off campus for more than 20 hours a week while carrying a full-time academic course schedule. First-generation students are also more likely to resort to attending school part-time while working full-time. The first-generation students’ obligations to family and work often limit their participation in campus activities, support services, and the full college experience. All of these challenges often result in first-generation students having less time for academic study or campus engagement, both of which place them at-risk during their first year of college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These tendencies towards part-time enrollment and work responsibilities all contribute to these students having lower levels of campus engagement and interactions with peers in non-classroom contexts. All of these items place first-generation students at a disadvantage for gaining the benefits from the social development of a college education (Pascarella, Pierson, Terenzini, & Wolniak, 2004).

Due to a lack of rigorous high school preparation, many first-generation students have lower ACT scores, which translate into a higher percentage of minority students entering community colleges, instead of four-year colleges and universities. The community college is often the preferred destination for many of these students who are the first in their family to

attend college (Phillips & Patton, 2000). It is also noted that while the families may support the notion of their student attending college, the families usually do not have the financial or social know-how to assist their students in pursing the steps in this endeavor. These students are faced with an overwhelming sense of having to gain the "social know-how" needed to file financial aid and college applications and navigate orientation, advising, and registration procedures (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Community college and four-year institutions alike are seeing increased numbers of students who enter college unaware of the major academic and social transitions needed in order to persist. Low-income first-generation students, across all institutional types, are four times more likely than their non-first-generation counterparts to leave college in their first year (Davis, 2010).

They are entering a different academic environment armed with lower academic preparation and fewer social skills than their non-first-generation counterparts to aid them in this very large transition. The description of first-generation students based on the Pell Institute Report reflects the large Latino and African American percentage of the population and includes many African American male college students. As Davis (2010) stated, first-generation does not always mean low-income, for any group. However, he conceded that the data clearly indicates a larger percentage of the minority population than the Caucasian population falls into the lower socioeconomic group (Davis, 2010).

Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) describe in detail the integration factors needed for first-generation student transition and success. They note that students are facing related integration issues in three separate domains: (1) academic, or the degree to which they are able to navigate the academic environment and reconcile; (2) personal and social integration, meaning

their sense of belonging at their institution; and (3) cultural integration, meaning how much the first-generation students discover, understand, and accept the values, norms, beliefs, and behaviors of the campus culture (Ward et al., 2012, p. 62). In general, the scholars (Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ward et al., 2012) agreed on the characteristics of first-generation students, with the exception of income and parent's education completion. Ward et al. (2012) disagreed with Davis (2010) about the family education level being the biggest factor to aid the college-going experience of the children.

They noted that degree completion by the parents was not the only helping factor, as Davis (2010) indicated. Ward et al. (2012) contend that the parents having meaningful experiences while attending college and going through admissions, orientation, making decisions about majors, learning help-seeking skills, and taking finals was the college cultural capital that could be passed on to the children. They concur with Davis (2012) and others that the cultural and social capital of the parents' college-going experiences are a "cumulative process" (p. 8) that they accumulate and pass on to their children.

Many first-generation students, including African American males, feel like imposters and are fearful of talking in their classes (Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ward et al., 2012). All first-generation college students are in need of help understanding the college culture, the need for academic study groups, how to engage in academic discussions, the importance of time management, and the big difference between high school and college academic expectations and work-loads. The research supports more faculty involvement and peer mentors to serve as guides who can also offer some wisdom and emotional support (Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008;

Ward et al., 2012). They all concur that these students need role models, mentors, and guides (Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ward, et al., 2012).

The scholars also identified the same behaviors that tended to keep the first-generation students off campus more than their non-first-generation counterparts. These behaviors included not using academic resources or support services, working too many hours, not engaging in campus activities or organizations, little interaction with their faculty, and not engaging in enough study time (Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ward et al., 2012). These same behaviors have been discussed (Bonner II & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2005), as they pertain to the lack of persistence and credential attainment of many African American male college students. The added dimension of first-generation, whether low-income or not, does not enhance the ability of the African American male college student to be successful in persisting and completing college. The fact that the reports are asking for better means of identifying this demographic as they enter colleges to enhance the "blurry picture" of this growing demographic (Davis, 2010, p. 6) in order to shed light on the students' challenges and academic and social engagement needs could be of great benefit to the lagging persistence rates of many African American males in colleges across the country.

The challenges of being first-generation are interwoven into the societal and cultural barriers impacting African American males who enroll in post-secondary education. It is a daunting task to remain committed to staying at a PWI for minority students (Flowers, 2006; Furr & Elling-Theodore 2002; Tinto, 1993). Over the last 20 years, researchers (Cuyjet, 2006; Kunjufu, 2001; La Vant et al., 1997; Majors & Billson, 1992) have described the multiple societal barriers experienced by many African American males that contribute to this challenge,

including disjointed and chaotic home environments, economic disadvantages, and academic failure.

These at-risk male students, many of whom are first-generation students, have need of more academic support, according to Cuyjet (2006) and TRIO (2009), in order to increase their self-efficacy and ability to apply skills to new situations in order to increase the ability to persist (Dagley et al., 2001). When researchers focus on the African American male, it has been to examine the social barriers of systemic racism, fatherless homes, and violence impacting their education achievement at virtually every level (Gibbs, 1988; LaVant et al., 1997; Majors & Billson, 1992; Slaughter, 1988). These researchers, among others, have pointed out that many African American males face multiple barriers including disrupted home environments resulting in economic disadvantages, exposure to gangs and drugs, academic failure, and lack of support within a traditional education system. The young men they describe arrive on their college campus lacking cultural capital.

> Cultural capital has been defined as: institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion, the former referring to exclusion from jobs and resources and the latter, to exclusion from high status groups (Lamont & Lareau, 1988, p. 156).

This cultural capital has been described by Brown and Davis (2001) as a socially reproduced resource that grants individuals support of a network that facilitates receiving social rewards such as status and privilege and position within certain social circles, professions, or organizations. This is the social and cultural know-how that non-first-generation students possess due to their parents' advanced education and immersion in society (Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ward et al., 2012).

The cultural capital African American males gain by peer support groups for tutoring and studying along with clubs, organizations, and faculty interactions has been proven to enhance African American persistence rates (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Though historically, these students participate at a much lower rate than other groups on campus, Cuyjet (2006) indicates that the first step is to develop programs that attract them. Some of the latest research (Braxton, 2000; Bush, 2004; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007) indicates that many of the African American males perceive the clubs and activities as "too White" in their scope of membership and context on the campus.

In contrast to the average African American males' experiences, high-achieving African American males often take leadership roles in their PWI's in order to encourage other students (Flowers, 2006; Foster, 2008). These high-achieving males have high profiles even though they are affiliated with team sports or are officers in student government or a fraternity. These young men have done the self-work to realize that they can be both intellectual and a Black man without feeling like a sell-out (Harper, 2006). This contradicts the views by Fordham and Ogbu (1988) that African American students are hampered by Black culture, which perceives schooling as learning to act White. The high-achieving young men described above arrive on campus ready to get involved and make their mark as leaders. How does this compare to the ordinary young men who are conflicted about learning, arrive on campus academically underprepared and not really sure of the reasons for going to college in the first place?

Arrival to Campus

In contrast to his high-achieving Black male peers, the average African American male often arrives at the PWI college/university with stereotyped labels preceding his arrival. He may

lack the self-awareness of the high-achieving African American male leaders at HBCUs and PWIs and is facing the reality of being underprepared and registered for developmental courses. Many of his behaviors have been described as a defense mechanism for being relegated to second-class citizenship or oppositional behavior so as not to be perceived as acting White (Harper, 2006; Harris III & Edwards, 2010; Major & Billson, 1992; Ogbu, 1988). The description of the word "cool" by Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson (1992) relates to Black men using a hardened and detached demeanor to cope with discrimination and racism without losing their sanity (Majors & Billson, 1992). Reese (2004) agrees with this definition and notes that coolness is a symbol of defiance (Reese, 2004). Harris III and Edwards (2010) talked about the men feeling societal pressures to perform "like a man." The young college men often felt the need to "wear a "mask" of hyper-masculine behaviors which they realized were damaging to themselves and others. They would focus on partying and not preparing for classes. The young men would, at some point in their development, seek guidance from older role models who challenged these societal norms and expressed masculinity in a broader fashion.

Media Images

This cool image of defiance has become a mainstay of media advertising. Advertising agencies continue to use rap artists, entertainers, and pro athletes who bypass college to get paid in the NBA or NFL to be the faces of success in the media. This has given rise to the constant declarations that education is not the way to make money in America. Unfortunately, in the last 25 years many middle-class African American male rappers such as LL Cool J, NWA, Tupac Shakur, and Jay-Z embraced the gangsta image (Reese, 2004). They celebrated and extolled the

virtues of extensive body tattoos, expensive cars with costly rims, and sagging pants for their commercial gain, while young African American brothers from the neighborhood to the suburbs bought and believed the hype (Reese, 2004).

Over 25 years ago, basketball legend Michael Jordan started wearing an earring. His sheer international media presence paved the way for sports stars in basketball and football to adopt his style. This style then transcended sports to entertainment media, and stars, both Black and White, began to wear earrings. The image moved to the traditional television networks when national correspondent Ed Bradley appeared on *Sixty Minutes* wearing an earring. This action was described by Reese (2004) and authors Hutchinson (1994) and West (2001) as a symbolic act of defiance to signify employment rather than ownership. The media moguls and the rappers romanticized not just the earring-wearing image of defiance, but also sold young African American males an anti-education and pro-drugs and violence mythology (Hutchinson, 1994; Reese, 2004). This anti-intellectualism is part of the reason many of these young men are not fulfilling their academic potential.

Anti-Intellectualism and Nihilism

The tragic irony of the media hype is that many African American males from middle-class homes are turning to anti-intellectualism due to their desire to "keep it real" like their sports and "gangsta rap" heroes (Reese, 2004, p. 48). Examples of this include Kanye West, who was college educated but on the Intro to his College Drop Out CD in response to the principal's request to *sing a song* to excite the school kids, sang lyrics celebrating dealing drugs to make a living ("We Don't Care," West, 2004, track 2). Many others are trapped in the bottom rungs of

the lower socioeconomic ghetto, with fewer buffers against racism. These buffers had included strong extended families, communities, and churches. West (2001) contends that the lack of these buffers generates "nihilism" in the people living in the ghetto and sub-cultures. He is defining "nihilism" here as a lived experience of hopelessness versus a philosophical doctrine questioning the grounds for a legitimate structure of authority (West, 2001, p. 43). West contends that one's ability to endure racism is weakened by fewer buffers, which in turn creates more hopelessness. This increased hopelessness creates a sub-culture based in nihilism that sparks tragic responses in young African American males' attitudes about reading, learning, staying in school, avoiding gangs, and getting a job instead of selling drugs. The tragedy of nihilism is the self-fulfilling prophecy of loss of hope, creating no viable future (Reese, 2004; West, 2001).

This lack of support in their lives is reflected in the research by Bonner II (2001); Flowers (2006); and Thomas (2003), who note that African American men face numerous challenges as they enter higher education, due to their self-concepts and identity issues which results in negative behavior as a result of these items. These scholars state that the students come to the college campus after years of being in educational systems that *did not* support their racial centrality or nurture their self-concepts in order to enhance confidence in their ability to succeed academically.

This lack of self-confidence in academic ability is based in many of the stereotypes about Black men. More than any other group, African American men are considered physical beings lacking in intellectual skills and this stereotype is often shared by many unenlightened educators (hooks, 2004)**.** Many of the males have damaged self-esteem and self-concepts after years of perceived discrimination, and arrive on the campus with disdain for most activities that are

designed to academically or socially engage students (Carpenter, 2005; Chavous et al. 2003; Cuyjet, 2006; Harris III & Edwards, 2010; Harris III, Palmer, & Struve, 2011; Majors & Billison, 1982).

Many of the young males arrive on campuses exhibiting hyper-masculine posturing such the cool pose (Harris III et al., 2011; Majors & Billson, 1982) or bragging about not liking to read or wanting to learn. These behaviors and other macho hyper-masculine behaviors are considered incongruent with the college environment. These African American males may then resist using college resources such as tutoring and counseling, having been socialized to believe that receiving such assistance suggests vulnerability, femininity, and loss of power. If they are trying to project a gang-banger image, they do not want to be perceived as weak by asking for help. Several studies conclude that African American males' success in college is influenced by institutional characteristics and campus climate that help them, through formal and informal interventions, to overcome this resistance to engaging in classes and seeking help from campus resources (Carpenter, 2005; Harper, 2005; Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004).

Solutions

The goal is to offer programs and interventions that engage Black men in and out of their classes, enhancing both their academic success and career goals. The challenge for many African American men has been to reach the economic status of the dominant culture and be able to serve as the head of the household, serve their community, and feel respected and valued. The paradox is that society has embraced and romanticized the sub-culture in order to sell not only music, but all types of shows and products.

According to Palmer, Davis, and Hilton (2009) and Reese (2004), these young men arrive on college campuses using different language, listening to different music, and expressing their manhood in ritualistic displays, but remain conflicted because they desire the social and academic skills needed in order to pursue lucrative careers. The authors suggest that these young men have embraced a dangerous mythology that can land them in prison, maimed due to violence or strung out on drugs, unless they can be convinced to change their mind about learning (Palmer et al., 2009; Majors & Billson, 1992; Reese, 2004). They want to learn but don't want to be considered too smart or too interested or involved in school. It is also noted that these same phenomena are also related to the pride issue that keeps many African American males from seeking help from tutors, faculty, or other student affairs/academic resources as needed (Bonner II & Bailey, 2006; Cuyjet, 2006, Harris III et al., 2011).

PWIs & HBCUs: Research on African American Students

In this section, the focus will be on the literature over the last two decades that examined African American students at historical Black colleges and primarily White colleges. In addition, a closer examination will delve into studies that focused on African American male students. Research over the years has consistently indicated that the overall experiences for African American students at HBCUs benefit their self-efficacy in the ability to learn and lead. For generations of African American students this has resulted in better persistence and graduation rates for them (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; (Cokley, 2002). HBCUs continue to be the undergraduate institutions that produce the largest percentage of graduates who become United States Army officers, federal judges, and doctors (Brown & Davis, 2001). Most of the past

research compared HBCU students' levels of belonging, persistence, faculty interactions, leadership opportunities, and matriculation to minority students' experiences while attending PWIs. The HBCUs, while often struggling financially, have been able to remove the stressors of racism and provide better learning environments, student support services, and leadership development opportunities for African American students. Recent research of HBCUs has taken a new direction in the study of African American males as a separate group looking at their motivation and gender differences in involvement and leadership (Harper, 2005; Palmer et al., 2009).

The majority of the research directed towards African American males over the past decade and a half focused on comparing engagement or retention of students at four-year primarily White Institutions (PWIs), Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), or on the academically gifted males (Flowers, 2006; Fries-Britt, 1997**;** Harper**,** 2005). The African American males at the HBCUs were found to possess much higher levels of confidence in their ability to succeed. Researchers suggest that this is due to institutional characteristics including supportive classroom environments, high levels of positive support, more interaction with faculty, and leadership development of students (Brown & Davis, 2001; Harper et al., 2005). They also mentioned higher peer mentoring and nurturing from African American role models who included faculty and administrators. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concur with Harper's (2005) findings that students who attend HBCUs possess higher levels of social integration due to these supportive faculty and administrative relationships.

The bulk of the early literature is primarily minority student studies that did not use gender as a variable. After 2000, more studies did add gender as a variable (Bonner II and Bailey, 2006;

Harper, 2006; Harper et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, the majority of the research stems from examining African American students' persistence, preferences and retention at PWIs or comparing their success against those same students at HBCUs. One area that discussed gender was the literature on help-seeking and coping strategies by race.

Seeking help in order to gain academic success is an important measure of self-advocacy for college students. Sheu and Sedlacek (2004) reported a gender difference in their findings on help seeking and coping strategies by race. They note that when gender is a variable, all females, regardless of ethnicity, were more willing to seek professional support. The only exception for the gender variable was seeking help for alcohol and/or drug counseling. African American females would use all types of services, whether for academic, career, or mental health issues. African American males would use services normally for career-related counseling, but not for academic or emotionally related issues.

Sheu and Sedlacek (2004) state that their study supports past research by Hargrove and Sedlacek (1997) on African American gender differences in help-seeking attitudes. They note that males use more avoidance coping strategies. These findings are supported by Lillian Chiang, Carla D. Hunter, and Christine J. Yeh (2004), whose study focused primarily on Black and Latino college undergraduate students. Chiang et al. agree that the Black males use avoidance coping such as playing video games, exercising, or sports, but added that they will also access friends and family for help coping with personal or emotional issues.

One significant intersection of race and gender was found. This intersection indicated that the Black males were much less favorable towards professional counselors than were Black females, while Latino males were more favorable towards professional counselors than were

their female counterparts (Chiang et al., 2004). The implication for student affairs/services professionals is the need for program development that takes into accounts the cultural norms and provides informal networking with the Black and Latino students, clubs, and organizations to provide resources and information to reduce the stigma of reaching out for help. Mentoring programs and peer advisors are another means of providing support and outreach (Chiang et al., 2004).

Programs that provide support or leadership opportunities are equally important. Cuyjet (2006) and Harper (2005) stress how important it is for faculty and staff to clearly articulate to African American males the benefits of leadership involvement in the PWIs. They urge institutions to disseminate information to all levels of the college about the diverse leadership opportunities and promote involvement. African American males coming from disadvantaged backgrounds can benefit positively from immersion into the social fabric of a campus.

Furr and Elling-Theodore (2002) note that numerous studies indicate that African American students, both female and male, gain positive benefits from mentoring and support programs during their first one to two years of college, resulting in higher retention rates. The retention studies documenting the importance of the first year for all students, further support this finding (Biel et al., 1999; Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005) contend that students' initial experiences with their campus directly impact their persistence decisions.

Harper (2006) points to Ferguson, Ludwig, and Rich (2001), who rejected Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) "theory of acting White." According to Ferguson et al. (2001), achievement is more negotiable among African American students than Fordham and Ogbu's work suggests.

Ferguson et al. argue that students can "invest their time in academic endeavors while still being able to signify an authentic sense of racial solidarity with their African American peers. In their perspective "the Other" is not viewed as adopting racelessness or rejecting one's own racial identity, nor is "the Other" meant to describe White people. Ferguson et al. posit that their view of "the Other" offers another perspective of oppositional culture that is uniquely African American. The essential feature is the preservation of a shared African American identity that is distinct and in opposition to "the Other." According to this shared racial solidarity view any Black person who seeks to escape the stigma of race as the main identifier for themselves may be accused of "acting White" (p. 378).

Harper noted that, while several studies on African American males at the college level existed, his literature review would be based on the K-12 African American male student literature base due to its greater depth. He felt that the college level research lacked sufficient depth to support his research. Harper (2006) reports in his findings that these high-achieving African American males felt applauded and supported by their peers. Many of them commented that because of their high visibility on campus, they were supported by generally all of their peers, even the athletes. Several of the high achievers held officer's roles in not only minority organizations, such as Black Student Association or historically Black Greek organizations, they held positions of authority in student government or the student union board. These students' perceptions were that their peers were aware of their responsible positions and willingness to speak up on issues important to Black students.

Harper (2006) contends that his findings based on his limited study support Ferguson et al. (2001) and not Ogbu (1988). His study, he contends, had several obvious limitations. It relied

on self-reporting of peer perception and only interviewed the high-achieving African American males, not their peers who may have reported different perceptions. He posits that in his limited study, these high achievers had negotiated a different perception of themselves, as high achievers who get things done without being perceived as trying to be White or girly. He suggests that this shift in the African American male peer support for accepting activities beyond the usual macho code that is carried on from middle school to college should be explored (Harper, 2005, 2006).

Herndon and Hirt (2004) sought to determine the impact of Black fraternities on the academic success of the African American males. They noted that many young African American males lack proper male role models and that families should introduce them to male teachers, ministers, and recreational leaders in order to provide balance in their lives. The researchers note the importance of Black Greek organizations, which they viewed as a source of peer support and mentoring from role models. They state that the number of African American college students would grow exponentially if every current Black college student would adopt one young student and serve as a role model to help prepare that younger student for college (Herndon & Hirt, 2004, p. 506). They summarize that this would be particularly true for Black male college students given the scarcity (in numbers) of African American male role models in higher education at PWIs.

Museus (2008) examined the role of ethnic student organizations on African American student adjustment at PWIs. Museus notes that the continued decline in educational attainment will have a negative impact on personal income and threaten the country's economic well-being as well as its tax base. Museus (2008) points to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2005, NSSE) data that reports African American and Asian American students are the least

satisfied with their overall college experience. Low graduation rates reflect minority students feeling left out, but the support of sub-cultures such as ethnic clubs, fraternities, and sororities can highly enhance minority students' college experiences (Museus, 2008). The ethnic organizations on campus create an important sub-culture that foldssocial involvement and assistance with acclimation into the expectations for success at a PWI. It also provides the sense of pride and belonging, which supports the research (Dagley et al., 2001; Kuh & Love, 2000; Phinney, 2004).

According to Museus (2008), African American males and other minority students should find membership in at least one or more sub-cultures (ethnic organizations on campus) if they are to persist and be successful in attending a PWI. He states that this finding supports Tierney (1999), who disagreed with Tinto (1997). Tinto theorized that students coming from incongruent cultures must sever all ties of cultural origin in order to adopt the values and mores of the new culture. Tierney states that this required severing of cultural identity was an unfair burden requested of students in order to assimilate to the dominant culture. Tierney (1999) felt that Tinto's separation from community was not applicable to minority students because the model was intended to describe progression within a culture as opposed to assimilation from one culture to another. He notes that there are gaps in the literature and that additional research should be conducted to examine the role of various cultural factors or other cultural frameworks in shaping outcomes. He suggests that this would expand on Tinto's limited look at only one cultural variable.

When reviewing the literature, it became apparent that a large percentage of the studies were quantitative ones whether the sites were four-year or two-year institutions (Bush, 2004;

Cokley, 2002, Flowers, 2006). A majority of the studies employ quantitative surveys (Bush, 2004; Glenn, 2001) and analysis of data sets (Flowers, 2006; Redman Mingo, 2010). The percentage of qualitative studies was much lower. One of the methodological weaknesses of several of the qualitative studies reviewed (Fries–Britt, 1997; Foster, 2008; Stevens, 2006) was the limited sample sizes, interviewing less than 15 students. Another limitation identified by researchers was sample selection. Museus (2008) interviewed 12 Black and 12 Asian students in a large rural university about ethnic organization membership, but admits that the purposeful selection meant only highly engaged students were interviewed. One of the larger qualitative studies was the Harper (2006) study on six PWI university campuses. He had a sample size of 32 students, but admitted that one of the limitations was only high achievers from a non-random sample had been interviewed. Before looking at two-year college research, a brief history of the community college system is provided.

Open Access: The Community College System

The community college system was founded as a social justice system to provide open access to higher education to Americans of all types of backgrounds besides the rich and elite. Several educators in the 19th and early 20th centuries advocated removing the first two years of college from the university and developing junior colleges (Vaughn, 1985). These institutions could provide technical education terminal programs to prepare people to enter the community work force. Additionally, they could offer courses to prepare those who wished to advance to a four-year college. William Rainey Harper is considered the spiritual father of the public junior

college. With his influence, in 1901 a high school in Joliet, Illinois, added two years to the high school to become the first public junior college (Vaughan, 1985).

In 1920, a meeting was called for by the U.S. Commission on Education that supported the creation of an association of junior colleges. The American Association of Junior Colleges passed its first constitution in 1921 and with it provided the two-year schools with a national support network and a national forum (Vaughan, 1985). Up until the Great Depression, community colleges had focused on liberal arts education. With many people lacking work, community colleges started offering job training programs to ease the high unemployment. The 1947 GI Bill would place junior colleges in a bigger national plan for educating masses of American citizens (AACC, 2015).

The idea of post-World War II soldiers needing training for the new consumer economy meant more open access to education was a national mandate. The Truman Commission in 1948 suggested that a network of locally run community colleges be established to provide the education and training with a local focus (AACC, 2015). The local high schools were seeking ways to provide more services to their communities and often they offered one or two programs at night in some locations. Many of the junior colleges were heavily attended by women preparing to become school teachers. Some junior colleges held classes in the local high schools at night, while others received state and local property taxes and began to build campuses (AACC, 2015). During the fast-growing period of the 1960s and 1970s, a majority of the states provided over one third of the funding and over 430 community colleges opened their doors. Two legislative acts during the Vietnam War were viewed as cultural and social acts that had a major impact on community colleges (Geller, 2001).

The Higher Education Facilities Act and the Vocational Education Act, both enacted in 1963, granted specific funding to community colleges and helped shape the national view of community colleges as open access. The rise of a national view of education as a democratic right and funding through a federal financial aid system brought "new students" to the community college. They were often students in the lower quartiles of their high schools' graduation classes or from lower socioeconomic groups (Geller, 2001). The community college was now viewed as the open door to higher education in America.

The name was changed to the American Association of Junior and Community Colleges in 1972 and in 1992 the name was simplified to its present American Association of Community Colleges. It now represents over 1200 two-year public community colleges and 13 million students (AACC, 2015).

African American Males in Community Colleges

Some critics feel that the community college cannot successfully focus enough program support for African American males because it strives to serve so many different stakeholders within the community. This requires stretching operational budgets to supply non-credit continuing education programs, literacy, and business training (Boswell, 2004; Pope, 2006). Over the last decade, increased numbers of underprepared high school graduates enter community colleges requiring remedial course work. Many students are faced with enrolling in at least one remedial course in either math, reading, or English before they can begin college-level coursework (AACC, 2015; Pope, 2006). It is argued by others that the community college system is accountable to support the persistence of African American male students due to its

mission of "open access" (Harper, 2005; Flowers, 2006: Cuyjet, 2006). The community colleges' open access mission forces them to try and have many roles from general education preparation for transfer to four-year institutions and personal learning classes to certificates and associate's degrees that lead straight into the workforce.

Workforce Preparation

Both Boswell (2004) and Pope (2006) contend that the shift in the community colleges away from transfer degree track programs that lead to higher future earnings comes at the expense of students of color, immigrants, and other at-risk groups. The term used for this lower education tracking is called sorting or "cooling off" (Cuyjet, 2006), which occurs to many non-traditional and African American students, often due to their needs for remediation in pre-college-level developmental coursework. Some critics attribute this decline in completion with "turning the open door into a revolving door" by offering little guidance towards higher degree plan for completion (Pope, 2006**,** p. 216). Scholars (Cuyjet, 2006; Pope, 2006) and work-force specialists (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2004) concur that minority students need to complete two-year college credentials even if they plan to transfer, due to the high rate of attrition at four-year institutions.

The reality is that two-year community colleges enroll the highest proportion of students of color, new immigrants, and part-time commuter students who are working full-time jobs. Community colleges serve as an economical route to a four-year college degree, but also provide short-term career training options (Boswell, 2004; Cross & Slater, 2000; Pope, 2006). Anthony Carnevale, a Senior Fellow with the Institute of Higher Education and the Economy, and

Desrochers (2004) note that the focus on career education is the result of the dramatic growth in knowledge jobs that require at least some college and technical skills. With this in mind, they acknowledge that the community college has become a major portal to the middle class by creating access to higher education and training.

Transfer and Completion Challenges

While the community college offers more access to higher education and training, the data still indicates that many minority students and first-generation students face more challenges. A study by the NCES (1996) yielded six factors that, if present, place a student at higher risk for attrition. These challenges are not exclusive to minority or first-generation students, but more likely to be present to some degree among both groups.

The report noted that community college students were significantly more prone to start college with some or all of these six factors than their than four-year university peers:

- Delayed entry into high school after college
- Having dependents (taking care of spouse or parents)
- Being a parent
- Not having a high school diploma
- Little or no financial support from family
- Working part-time or full-time

A similar study in 2000 determined that 24% of the community college students compared to 4% of the four-year students started college with four or more of the above listed high-risk attrition factors (Cokley, 2002). African American males may enter community college with some or all six of these at-risk factors in addition to the cultural incongruence that leads to challenges in assimilating to the community college environment. These students are often faced

with juggling stressful home lives that require them to care and provide for themselves, or their mothers, siblings, and/or children of their own (Cross, 2000; Cuyjet, 2006). The NCES (2005) data reveals that fewer African American males are successfully transferring to four-year institutions and states that African American males who remain on a community college campus into a third year pursuing enough credits to transfer to a four-year institution are less likely to transfer or complete a certificate or degree.

Two-year College Research

After an exhaustive review of the literature regarding African American males' characteristics and academic and social integration, it became apparent that the major depth of research-based literature was focused on African American males at four-year institutions (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Dagley et al., 2001; Harper & Quaye, 2007). The scant research located on African American males at community colleges was published within the last decade (Beckles, 2008; Bush, 2004; Foster, 2008; Harper, 2004; Museus, 2008). Most studies that examined academic and social integration (Borglum & Kubala, 2000) did not fully concur with Tinto's findings.

Borglum and Kubala (2000) sought to determine the relationship between academic and social integration and student performance measures, and withdrawal rates at a large multi-campus community college. They found that students who were academically achieving felt academically and socially integrated. Borglum and Kubala found no correlation between withdrawal rates and academic and social integration, which they noted could be attributed to using only second-semester students complete the survey. They stated that these students had

already been through a weeding out process and were more goal focused; they did see a correlation between low college placement scores and a higher withdrawal rate. This weak academic preparation could affect students' decisions about making the effort to become academically or socially integrated, if no support mechanisms were in place.

The most in-depth empirical research of two-year colleges in the past was by Pascarella (1999), who noted that, despite it being challenging to conduct because of the variety of models for community colleges, it was vital for policy makers in order to aid in the development of policies and programs to support community college students. At this time, he did comment on the lack of research on African American males, specifically at the two-year colleges. His immersion into researching community colleges using Tinto's theories on academic and social involvement to determine engagement and retention did seem to open the flood gates for further research of the two-year college experience (Pascarella, 1999). Most of the retention research conducted up to this point had focused on White students at four-year residential institutions. Now that one of the top researchers had called attention to these issues, more research studies began to include students of color and use of gender as a variable.

Institutional Characteristics Research

A study on two-year completion rates for students of color focused on enhancing program completion (Opp, 2002) used survey data from the National Study of Chief Student Affairs Officers (CSAO), which reported on retention barriers and strategies. Opp merged that data with Institutional Post-Secondary Educational Data Systems Completion Data reports

(IPEDs), which are reports that outline career and general education program completion by institution. Some of the factors outlined in his findings that served as significant positive predictors of program completion for students of color include having a CSAO of color, peer tutoring with other students of color, and more faculty and administrators of color, creating a critical mass of diverse people. He surmised that the visibility and higher administrative role of a chief student affairs officer enabled the CSAOs to advocate for retention strategies and programs to assist the persistence of students of color as well as encourage more diverse hiring (Opp, 2002).

Bush (2004) examined the effects of community college institutional characteristics on the academic achievement of African American males. This case study was conducted at a large multi-campus community college in southern California. He examined program completion data sets from the California Community College information system, responses from a student survey, and interviews with 6 African American male students as part of a case study.

Bush (2004) examined the effects of both institutional and non-institutional variables on students' achievement as it related to transfer rates, grade-point averages and persistence degree attainment and concluded that both campus climate and faculty interactions were strong predictors of good grades, persistence, and successful transfer. Faculty interaction continues to be a recurring theme, often mentioned as critical for engaging students and increasing their persistence. Bonner II and Bailey (2006) as well as Foster (2008) urged the use of mentors, staff, faculty, and positive peers to influence new students and attempt to reach those who have not become engaged or focused. Faculty interaction is also described as one of the factors for students leaving if the student/faculty interactions are negative or withheld **(**Astin, 1993;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Another issue affecting student achievement is the amount of energy invested in the activity (Astin, 1985).

Greene, Marti, and McClenney (2008) examined the effort and outcome differences for African American and Hispanic community college students in student engagement and academic achievement. They wanted to determine if these students were investing different amounts of energy into their educational practices, known as the Effort-Outcome Gap (EOG), and whether it had a positive impact on their outcomes. Greene et al., (2008) findings suggest that the African American students' self-reported levels of engagement could represent an Effort-Outcome Gap. The African American students come to community college far behind their White and Hispanic counterparts. The study evidence suggests that starting much further behind their peers meant having to expend more energy in order to persist and meet the same educational goals. These students on average added one or two semesters to their degree completion because of the need for remediation.

In summary, the study's evidence suggests that the use of an additional range of attributes was required by the African American students, who had to employ more contextual intelligence. Sheu and Sedlacek (2004**)** define these as adaptive skills that enable one to navigate culturally incongruent surroundings and focus on developing relationships. The African American students had to employ these skills more than the students of the dominant culture. Researchers Greene et al. (2008) and Sheu and Sedlacek (2004) all have findings which confirm that the dominant culture faces fewer barriers on the college campus. They suggest that additional research should focus on identifying the institutional conditions that can enhance minority students' levels of

engagement. They suggest exploring which student factors can be modified by altering the institutional characteristics in order to enhance student engagement and retention.

Both Flowers (2006) and Wood (2011) conclude that the research literature has not adequately explored the impact of two-year college attendance on African American male students. The scarce literature regarding the African American male experiences at community college has yet to adequately address the students' levels of engagement, perceptions of their community college, and how both impact their persistence (Bush, 2004; Flowers, 2006; Glenn, 2001; Greene et al., 2008; Roberts, 2009; Wood, 2011).

The initial research by Glenn (2001) was a study that used surveys and a case study with no formal theoretical framework listed in the information. He focused his study primarily on institutional characteristics that affected the African American males' perceptions of their campus as well as their persistence levels. In examining African American males' perceptions of campus climate at 61 Texas community colleges, Glenn (2001) completed an in-depth analysis of which factors contributed to retaining and graduating African American males. His study used both quantitative and qualitative methods, including interviews and a questionnaire. Glenn (2001) found that the community colleges at the top quartile in graduating African American males had instituted more retention strategies, used more interventions for high-risks students to monitor their progress, and were noted for their friendly campus environments.

Another study that examined perceptions of the campus climate was conducted by Pope (2006). His study examined the non-White students' perceptions regarding diversity on their campuses. This study was actually conducted with both males and females, but Pope only reported the African American males' responses when writing the chapter (Cuyjet, 2006). Pope

found that students felt fairly good about their support from the faculty but less sure of support and acceptance from fellow students.

Alfred Roberts (2009), similar to Glenn (2001), sought to examine a larger group of community colleges to see which ones were graduating the higher percentages of African American males. Roberts provided an extensive theoretical framework to support his study of the 23 colleges in the Virginia Community College Systems to analyze which were enrolling and graduating or transferring the highest percentage of African American men. He determined that examining the institutional characteristics and practices of these institutions would best predict the persistence of the African American male students until graduation or transfer. He found that campus characteristics did seem to influence enrollment but was unable to replicate the same conclusion for the persistence analyses, and determined that the findings were inconclusive.

College characteristics and practices vary and these factors may influence enrollment and persistence of African American males. These characteristics are typified by broad categories such as the college's efforts to support minority students and student development. Roberts (2009) notes in his findings that supporting an inclusive environment with student organizations that provided leadership opportunities for African American males and campus climate was one type of effort.

Stevens (2007) interviewed twelve 18- to 20-year-old African American male students to gain insight into their perceptions of their academic and social experiences at one New York state community college. This predominately white community college located in a suburban/rural area of New York had a strong academic reputation and a diverse student population. Most of the African American male students enrolled at the college lived near

campus in the housing projects and had what Astin (1993) describes as a lower SES. Stevens (2007) concluded that a recurring theme was the need to "skate the zones," which she described as feeling comfortable in a variety of settings and learning to navigate the expectations of the college culture without sacrificing one's unique Black culture. Her findings noted that the students wanted to do well in college because it was a means of moving up and out of the neighborhood, but that they lacked role models and needed faculty validation and support to increase their ability to persist (Stevens, 2007, p. 154).

Foster (2008) focused on gaining insight into African American males' educational and engagement experiences. He did this through extensive interviews conducted with 12 students at one suburban California community college. Foster (2008), like Stevens (2007), is one of the few studies that sought the men's perceptions of their community college experiences as it relates to both academic *and* social experiences. Foster commented that one of his study's limitations was the lack of campus participation by most of the participants selected. Most of the students were not involved in any campus programs or clubs and reported their limited time on campus was due to work schedules or caring for siblings or their own children. One of the themes that emerged from the students' interviews, according to Foster (2008), was the desire for more African American male cohorts to decrease the feeling of isolation in their classes. This cohort could serve as a peer group to bounce ideas off of and discuss problems with outside of class time.

Beckles (2008) conducted a multi-campus study at five community colleges in the Mid-Atlantic Region. He sought to have African American male community college students identify factors they perceived as important to their academic success. Beckles's study was limited to

perceptions about academic success and not social engagement or integration. Beckles (2008) conducted 60-minute focus groups with 31 African American males at the colleges. The sites selected for the study had two colleges representing urban areas, two colleges representing suburban areas, and one college representing the rural area. Beckles also found that some institutional factors such as demographics and whether students felt welcomed did impact their persistence rates. This concurs with the findings of Glenn (2001).

Flowers's (2006) study on the effects of two-year institutions on African American males' academic and social integration in the first year of college supports the need for two-year institutions to enhance their policies and practices. His study was framed by Tinto's theories on academic and social integration. The majority of research has consistently shown that both academic and social integration experiences impact a student's persistence. In his study, Flowers examined the impact of attending a two-year college (versus a four-year college) on African American males' academic and social integration in the first year of college.

Flowers (2006) used data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) (1996, 1998). The student cohort which constitutes the primary sampling unit in BPS was based on the 1996 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NAPSAS, 1996). The base cohort was approximately 12, 000 students. Consistent with the base-year sample design, the base-year students were re-surveyed in 1998. Two years after the initial data collection. 10,000 students participated in the second year follow-up. The current survey was based on 467 African American males who began their college studies in the 1995-1996 academic years.

Flowers (2006) suggests that four other sources of influence needed to be taken into account for a better understanding of outcomes: (a) pre-college characteristics and background

traits, (b) institutional characteristics, (c) students' academic experiences in college, and (d) students' non-academic experiences in college (Flowers 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991;). In his findings, Flowers (2006) stated that the males at four-year institutions had much higher levels of academic and social integration experiences. He said this translated to more study groups, formal or informal contact faculty members outside of class, meetings with advisors and participating in clubs and organizations, service activities, or involvement in varsity or intramural sports. In his recommendations for future research, Flowers (2006) said that researchers should see what the community college African American males' perceptions were about their level of academic and social integration. Flowers's recommendations for future research helped focus more attention on the gap in the literature.

Harper (2005), Cuyjet (2006), and Flowers (2006) all concur that studies such as those done by others (Beckles, 2008; Bush, 2004; Foster, 2008; Stevens, 2007) are needed because higher education institutions and their administrators are seeking better data to assist in the design and implementation of stronger retention programs to support the academic success of all African American students, especially the males. A current gap in the literature centers on the males' perceptions of their community college experiences. The students' voices can give insights into their perceptions of the campus environment and what factors inhibit their levels of involvement. The students can provide more understanding of why they are less engaged than any other group. Additional analysis of successful academic and social engagement factors that leads to African American males' persistence would enhance program assessment to better serve these students and increase their transfer and credential completion rates.

Recently, the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center conducted a briefing at Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research. This session was held to announce the release of two reports culled from census data, in-depth interviews, and academic research. The reports were about the educational experiences of men of color, the current research and path of progress. The *Los Angeles Times* writer Carla Rivera (2011) wrote an article about the bleak reports the very same week of the briefing. It was immediately seen on many educational list serves throughout the nation. She notes that the reports detail the education experiences of young men in several ethnic and racial categories: "African Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Latinos and Native Americans" (para. 3).

The findings from the reports on the experiences of men of color in the United States are not encouraging. Among the findings, the statistics remain much lower for African American males' aged 25-34 for associate's degree or higher completion rate 28% compared to 70% for Asian men and 44% for White men. Additionally, the gender gap continues to rise, with men in each race and ethnicity being less likely to attend and complete college. The report states that improving the outcomes for young men of color needs to become a national priority. This should be done by partnerships of community, businesses, and schools to provide the needed mentoring and support to ensure the success of these young men (Rivera, 2011).

It is apparent that much of the existing literature base on African American males in community colleges is focused on cognitive issues, academic integration and, if qualitative, based on very limited participant samples. One of the weaknesses in the literature base on African American males in community colleges is the use of very small samples for the qualitative studies. Additionally, many of the studies—even those that were survey and

interviews—were either about academic integration or examining academic issues that affect persistence. The few qualitative studies did not provide much information as to the reasons for low student use of support services or campus engagement. The gaps in the literature indicate that more information is needed about the male African American students' perceptions of their community college experiences.

Summary Statement

This review of the literature has focused on pertinent scholarly articles, education reports and research studies relevant to male African American college students. The review concluded with an emphasis on the studies that pertain to this population and their experiences at community colleges. The data in the education statistics reports indicate that male African American college students have fallen far behind all other student demographic groups.

The review also indicated a scarcity of community college research studies focusing on male African American students. These students' first-person accounts can add a deeper understanding of the students' needs and provide more insight into which factors and institutional characteristics enhance or impede academic and social engagement. This type of information can assist colleges' administrators as they strategically plan the use of resources to support students.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The purpose of this research study is to better understand African American male college students' perceptions of their academic and social experiences at a community college in the Midwest. A basic qualitative research study was conducted to provide a means of giving voice to the students' academic and social experiences and their meanings of these experiences.

This chapter is divided into sections that outline the methodology and procedures used to examine the academic and social perceptions of male African American students attending a Midwest regional community college. The first section provides an overview of qualitative research and a description of the study design. The overview includes the research questions that guided the study. A description of the sample and site selection criteria is given, followed by an explanation of procedural changes.

The next section describes the types of general data that was collected in interviews, documents, and college data. This is followed by a description of the data analysis procedures and perceived limitations of the study. The section on trustworthiness and consistency details the strategies used to support accurate reporting of participants' responses. A brief outline of the themes that emerged from the data analysis is provided. The final section discusses the researcher's bias and concludes with a summary statement of the chapter.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the male African American community college students' perceptions of their campus environment?
2. What have been their challenges and successes at community college?
3. What academic and student development support is offered by their institution?
4. Who are the mentors available for African American males?

Basic Qualitative Research

Merriam (2009) notes that the four major characteristics most identified with understanding the nature of qualitative research are those in which "the focus is on process, understanding and meaning, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive and the product is richly descriptive" (Merriam, 2009, p. 22). It is important to note that the area of interest being studied was done so from the participants' perspective and not that of the researcher. This research study was conducted because of the researcher's interest in examining students' perceptions of their community college experiences and perceptions of the college campus and the institution's impact on their experiences.

In this study I sought to illuminate students' general feelings and reasons they were more or less engaged on their campus. Creswell (2007) points out the need for the researcher to establish a rapport with the participants and create a safe environment for disclosure so the participants are willing to speak up and share their feelings. He reminds us that qualitative research is done when we need a "complex detailed understanding of the issue" and we want to "empower individuals to tell their stories, hear their voices and minimize the power relationship with the researcher" (Creswell, 2007, p. 40).

Research Design

A basic qualitative research study design was used, in order to gain insights into male African American community college students' perceptions of their experiences at their community college. Merriam (2009) states that explaining a complex concept such as qualitative research is just a beginning to understanding what this type of research is about. She states that the "overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience" (p. 14). She notes that applied fields of practice such as education, administration and counseling use an interpretive study approach and since all qualitative research is interpretive, including the word "interpretive" is not necessary (p. 22).

The study adhered to the standards of Northern Illinois University's Institutional Research Board by informing participants of the purpose and process of the research study.

Sample Selection

The researcher used snowball sampling to engage "well-situated" people to aid in locating students who met the sample criteria. This sampling format is based on asking a number of people who they think should be talked to and then asking those key students to participate in the study. Using these students' names and participants recruited by the fliers, I was able to ask for more referrals and reach many more students. Some participants either brought students to see me or referred them to me. This method insured that the snowball kept getting bigger, with more participants referring potential participants. According to Patton (2002), the growing

snowball of potential participants initially widens and diverges but eventually converges again as some names get mentioned repeatedly (Patton, 2002).

The criteria for the participants were: (a) those having less than 40 hours of earned college credits when they enter the study and those who are first-time students, which means they are still considered a two-year college enrollee; (b) those currently enrolled in a minimum of 6 credit hours at their community college, which, based on federal financial aid guidelines, means they are part-time students completing credit courses; (c) those who self-identify as African American, and (d) and those who confirm being between 18 years or more of age. In the community college studies examined by the literature review, it was noted that all of them modeled their age criteria after the four-year university traditional 18- to 21-year-old age group. Additionally, it was not feasible to restrict the sample by age in the community college setting. The median age for a community college student is 23, while 28 is the average age of a community college student; hence allowing for the wider age range is more representative of community college students. The percentage of students 22- to 25-years-old is 49% at community colleges (AACS, 2015). This wider range of ages also added to the depth of the students' life experiences.

This broad criterion did not exclude students based on their grade-point-average, level of coursework, or if they were working. The rationale for using such a broad criterion was to create more inclusion and encourage more African American males to participate in the study. The researcher determined that the criterion of being a first-time student was too restrictive and broadened the criteria to include returning students in order to expand the participant sample.

The literature review indicated that a larger percentage of African American males compared to White or Asian males may have "stopped out" after completing their GED or high school diploma. The reasons the students stopped out varied from military service, including time overseas, time in prison, or just working for a few years prior to attending their community college (Cuyjet, 2006; Kunjufu, 2001; Majors & Billson, 1992).

For the purpose of this study, my definition of the average African American male is a student who attends classes, may work, spends time using campus resources, and may engage with a club or organization. My definition is not based on the deficit view that was discussed in the literature review, which noted the "average African American males' level of campus engagement in clubs and organizations is dismal, noting that many African American male students are only involved in athletics, playing intramural basketball or using the fitness center with minor campus engagement or use of resources (Foster, 2008; Harper, 2006). The purpose for using less restrictive criteria was to include the "average African American males'" voices in the study in order to find out why some of the men chose to be engaged on campus and what caused others to be less engaged. In the community college studies reviewed, often a certain grade-point-average, academic major, or club involvement was used as criteria to see if these variables helped to explain the lower engagement levels of African American males.

Participants

The 27 participants were all currently enrolled at a Midwest college during data collection, and all self-identified as African American, with two of them being African immigrants. Because students have different credit hour totals to reach depending on their degree

or certificate, many community colleges use the number of terms or first year to describe a student's academic status instead of using the "freshmen to seniors" terminology. At the time of the study, 44% of the participants were first-year students with less than 24 credit hours completed. Returning students comprised another 13% of the participants, who had completed between 24 and 36 credit hours. The final-year participants who had completed between 37 and 60 credit hours were 43% of the total sample (Midwest College, Student Academic Records, 2014).

The participants' ages ranged between 18 and 61; 15 participants were between the ages of 18 and 21, eight were between the ages of 22 and 30, and four were between the ages of 31 and 61. The academic program enrollment varied, with 19 participants in transfer degree programs. Another six participants were enrolled in applied science or arts associate degree programs, and two participants were enrolled in certificate programs. These applied associate's degree and certificate programs would enable them to go directly into the workforce after graduation. Over 90% of the participants had moved from outside the community college's district for the purpose of attending a Midwest college, but moving to the area did not grant them in-district residency tuition rates. These out-of-district students' tuition rate was twice the rate of the in-district high school graduates. This higher tuition bill meant many of the participants, even those with financial aid, worked 20 or more hours a week to cover their living expenses.

Site Selection

Beginning the participant selection and fieldwork was significantly delayed when the initial site vice president and institutional research office, which had verbally agreed to host the

project, did not respond. After reviewing several options, the study site was changed to another community college. According to the 2012 Higher Learning Commission Self-Study, the Midwest college student enrollment reported 2011 population consisted of 60% part-time student and 40% full-time students. The gender breakdown was 47.9% men and 53.1% women. The 2011 data listed primary ethnic/racial classifications as 4% Asian, 0.5% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 15.2% Black or African American, and 56.7% White (Midwest College HLC Self Study, 2012). The data submitted to the state community college board in the 2013 College's Annual Enrollment report indicated the following data changes for student demographics: 66.7% White, 15.3% Black or African American, 7.4% Asian, and 5.1% Hispanic or Latino (ICCB, Midwest College Enrollment Report, 2013). The new site was also considered attractive to minority students due to its high transfer rate to several nearby four-year public universities and its proximity to a major public research university.

Approval to pursue the study and conduct research was approved by the Northern Illinois University Institutional Research Board. I sought the support of the community college president and vice president for student affairs/services to gain approval for institutional participation in this research study. The appropriate forms for internal research were filed with the college's Institutional Research Office and an approval letter was received.

The Midwest Community College is a beautiful sprawling campus that sits on more than 200 landscaped acres near the intersection of several interstates. The community college district it serves encompasses over 52 communities and is the third largest community college district in its state. The college is located in a semi-rural area within 2 to 3 hours of several major metropolitan areas and has a top-tier research university 10 miles from its campus. The

community college offers 120 degree and certificate programs enabling students to either transfer to four-year institutions or immediately enter careers. Midwest enrolls approximately 20,000 students annually through its credit, business training, and community education classes, with credit course headcounts averaging 8 to 9,000 students per semester. Of the more than 40 community colleges in the state, Midwest College possessed the highest transfer rate to the nearby Big Ten research university.

Data Collection

What is the basic definition of data? Data is information that is found in the environment in a variety of formats. Merriam (2007) describes data as bits and pieces of information: data that are words are labeled as qualitative data while those that are numbers are labeled as quantitative data. She cites Patton (2002), noting that qualitative data can consist of direct quotes and narratives of peoples' experiences and activities obtained through interviews.

Upon receiving the College's Institutional Research Board's permission to conduct an external study, I followed up with the campus departments. I sent the recruitment fliers (Appendix A) and introductory letter to the various offices (Appendix B) that had the most direct contact with students, such as admissions, financial aid, counseling and advising, the tutoring center, the library, and the athletics department. The use of an electronic format allowed faculty, student life club advisors, and departments with direct contact with students the ability to either e-mail it or hand it out. This flier described the study and provided the researcher's contact information. Upon receiving a referral from faculty or staff, I would follow up with the student.

The purpose of contacting students was to establish rapport, answer any questions they might have about the study, and schedule an appointment for the interview.

The fliers that were initially distributed across the campus were modified after three weeks, since there had been little response, to include a statement that stated "this was a confidential research project and would not impact a student's grades or status at the college." This statement was recommended by the Institutional Research director at Midwest Community College. According to that person, this would aid in recruitment and inform participants that the researcher was on staff as an administrator of the college. This simple statement helped increase the number of students responding to the flier within a week.

As pointed out, the flier was modified to emphasize the confidentiality and fact that it would not impact students' grades or enrollment status. Students who responded to the flier had the opportunity to email, call, or talk directly to the researcher in order to have any questions about the project answered. This interaction helped potential participants build a level of rapport and trust with the researcher. Additional recruiting in the college center took place for one week and successfully increased the base participant pool, thus enhancing the snowballing method for participant referrals. It became apparent that the week of open recruiting on campus for two hours per day was creating awareness, when one of the college's janitors walked a young man into my office and announced, "He wants to get interviewed by you."

Those students who agreed to participate were informed they would receive a $10 Amazon gift card for their time and an additional $5 card for each referral who became a participant in the study. This was changed to a $20 gift card for the initial interview and $10 per

referral who participated. The denomination for the gift cards was changed after faculty, staff, and students reported that students desired a bigger incentive for an hour or more of their time.

Interviews

In order to complete the 40 hours of fieldwork that were necessary for the research study, additional hours beyond the actual interviews were built into the study to complete specific goals. I completed more than 15 hours of recruiting and meeting with potential participants on the campus in order to build trust and rapport. I spent additional time explaining the paperwork, such as the demographic form and confidentiality form, and emailing the student his transcript to seek input and/or changes. In order to create a welcoming space and maximize timeliness of interview appointments, I would arrive 15 minutes before each interview to set out a bowl of candy, a bottle of water, a box of tissues and all of the forms and a copy of the questions for the arriving participant.

I opened each interview with some information about my background, my interest in this topic, and expressing my appreciation for their participation in the study. The general data collection consisted of the student profile/demographic information sheets (Appendix C), the consent forms (Appendix D), and data from the semi-structured interviews. Participants were provided a sheet outlining several topics (Appendix E) that would be discussed and a list of the 12 questions (Appendix F). Semi-structured one-on-one interviews lasted 1 to 2 hours, with the majority of interviews averaging 60-90 minutes. The individual interviews provided in-depth pictures of the students' perceptions about their engagement in community college. Using a series of structured, semi-structured, and open-ended interview questions allowed me to gain the

students' perceptions of their campus and what they felt were positives and challenges regarding support and being engaged on the community college campus.

The semi-structured interviews gave participants the opportunity share their experiences in detail. The participants' responses formed the basis for developing themes that emerged from the data analysis of the interviews. The participants' responses shaped the findings and answers to the research questions. The interview is described by Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p. 63) as a means of modern-day storytelling in which people "divulge life accounts in response to interview inquiries." According to Merriam (2009, p. 24), "All qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds." The basic premise of a basic qualitative study is to "uncover and interpret these meanings."

Questions varied from structured to less-structured and open ended; a few examples follow: How welcome do you feel here as a student at your community college? (Follow-up): Describe the experiences you have had here that makes you feel this way? How has your college experience changed you as a person and your relationships with family and friends? How do you spend your time outside of class when you are on campus? (Follow-up): What do you believe are the reasons for this? (Follow-up): If you don't stay on campus, what are the reasons you leave?

The semi-structured interview gained the students' perceptions of their campus and if they felt challenged, supported, or were engaged on their community college campuses. These stories were vital to developing a clear picture of how the students were making meaning of their experiences. Creswell (2007) points out the need for participants to be willing to speak up and share their feelings ... when we need a "complex detailed understanding of the issue" and we want to "empower individuals to tell their stories, hear their voices and minimize the power

relationship with the researcher" (p. 40). The last 10 to 15 minutes of each interview included open-ended questions that gave participants the opportunity to "give voice" to anything that had not been covered, but that they felt they wanted to discuss regarding their experiences on their campus.

All of the interviews were conducted on campus in a "quiet area" to afford the participants confidentially; a quiet small study room in one of the departments on campus was used to ensure privacy and good audio quality for taping the conversations. The interviews were audio-taped using high-quality tape and recorder and on the researcher's telephone and changed to MP3 audio files, when tape recorder glitches occurred. I hired a transcriber who signed a confidentiality form and was given the pseudonyms of the participants to assist with transcribing audiotaped interviews into verbatim documents.

Data collection occurred between February to mid-May 2014 and consisted of one- to two-hour audio-taped interviews using a set of 12 questions with follow-up questions to enhance the flow of the conversation and to aid with the ability to expand on specifics or explore topics with the participants. All 27 participants were provided with an explanation of the consent form, prior to their signing it, which described the process and gave the students the option to leave the study at any point they desired. Participants completed a confidential demographic sheet with contact email of choice, enabling the transcript to be sent to them for member checking. In the member checking, I sent a copy of the transcribed interview to each participant and solicited feedback from the participants to review the document for accuracy of their statements. Participants signed the consent form in two places: indicating their willingness to participate in the study and agreeing to be audio-taped. The researcher's consent form indicated all documents

would be kept secure and confidential for five years. Field notes were taken by the researcher and captured observations during each interview to be transcribed.

Member Checks of Transcripts

Member checks of the researcher's transcripts of the interviews were completed at the end of the semester. All of the males selected for the study self-identified as African American or African immigrants who were in the process of become United States citizens. Each participant was given a pseudonym in order to protect his privacy, which was used in all audio and written data collected and transcribed.

Data Analysis

The researcher began data analysis while concurrently collecting data. This is the preferred method for conducting qualitative data analysis. Merriam (2009) states that since the researcher starts out looking for answers but is not sure what he or she will find, the preferred method is to let the data that is collected and subsequent analysis shape the ongoing collection process as well as the analysis and findings. She notes that this is when a researcher must become comfortable with ambiguity. I used the first data collection to begin the analysis process and reassess what may need to be changed in the process, and began analysis of the data while still collecting data. This resulted in a reordering of the Interview Questions to aid in the flow of conversation.

The detailed personal accounts provided some recurring topics to be discussed within the interviews. These topics became categories used in the data analysis leading to the emerging

themes from the study. The analysis of the in-depth personal accounts provided themes which helped answer the research questions.

This study used the constant comparative method popularized by Glaser and Strauss (1967) by searching for emerging categories. The basic strategy of the method is compatible with what Merriam (2009) describes as the "inductive, concept-building, orientation of all qualitative research; the constant comparative method of data analysis has been adopted by many researchers who are not seeking to build substantive theory" (p. 199), meaning that the constant comparative method is commonly used in basic qualitative research. The author posits that all qualitative data analysis is basically inductive and comparative. She notes that qualitative data analysis is primarily making sense of the data. The key, according to Merriam (2009), is for the researcher to determine what information should be placed into categories or themes and what the relevancy to the research questions is because the goal of data analysis is to answer the research questions. As part of the data analysis process, this researcher reduced the data into a small set of categories. This process of category building is data analysis done in conjunction with data collection (Merriam, 2009).

Review of extant data is also helpful in confirming major themes as they emerge. The data can provide the same type of information as interviews or observations: providing descriptive information, verifying emerging hypotheses, or tracking historical background. This additional data can also add to the credibility of the information provided in the interviews. Collection of extant data began in March 2014 and continued until September 2015. The extant data collected for this research study included materials such as individual college feedback reports, catalogs, and web sites. The Achievers' Academic Progress report by yearly cohorts, the

Achievers Focus 2011 and 2013 group reports, and the Achievers fall-to-fall persistence reports were the reports about the African American learning community cohorts. I examined these to compare information about participants' experiences with the cohort, their faculty, and perceptions about institutional support and academic challenges and progress.

Some national and regional information examined were the community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) College Profile Reports and the individual College's 2014 CCSSE feedback report. Both of these were reviewed for data on student perceptions of overall faculty engagement, access to services and learning support resources, and the benchmarks for faculty–student interactions. The information was compared to the interview responses for similarities and differences. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) data, and the Community College Midwest Region Agency reports (ICCB) were reviewed to confirm semester-to-semester persistence and program completion rates for African American males.

In the open coding stage, the researcher examined the transcripts and documents, such as the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) Reports and Achievers' Learning Community 2011 and 2013 Focus Group Feedback reports, for salient categories of information shared in the transcripts or extant documents. I was interested in comparing the responses from the learning community focus groups to the interviews. I looked at the CCSSE reports regarding students' feelings about faculty–student interactions and students' awareness of and use of learning support resources. I also examined the Achievers Academic Progress Reports, the Achievers fall-to-fall persistence rate by cohorts because of the information

participants shared about feeling motivated to remain in school due to their cohort and encouragement from the Brothers.

The Brothers are a support and information-sharing group for African American males on campus. I also wanted to compare the learning community students' academic progress to other African American males who did not participate in the program. Additionally, I also reviewed the Achievers' academic progress reports and cumulative grade-point-average reports due to their discussions about competing for grades and completing development courses. Another reason to review the academic reports was to see how these students who were engaged in learning communities with learning support and social engagement fared in grades and persistence compared to students who were not in these programs. The learning community participants had reported feeling more engaged with the campus and committed to their academic goals due to their social engagement on campus.

The national and regional information examined included: The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) College Profile Reports, the individual College's 2014 CCSSE feedback report, and the Community College Midwest Region Agency reports (ICCB). Using the constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the researcher attempted to saturate topics by continuing to conduct interviews and review the data until no new information was emerging from the categories. Building the categories is a means of developing the themes, patterns and seeking answers to research questions (Merriam, 2009).

After reviewing the data again this time, focusing on repeated statements and quotes, I developed these into nodes of commonality or categories in order to create contextual descriptions of the participants' experiences. These categories allowed me to sort similar

information and develop themes about the participant's textural descriptions of their experiences (what they experienced) and a structural description (how they experienced it) in order to convey their overall experiences. The data collection remained flexible enough for discovery of emerging themes from the information shared by the students. A computer software program was best for data storage and provided easy access to the coding the researcher had developed (Creswell, 2007).

An open code book was developed by examining all transcripts, field notes and other relevant documents. Notes in the margins were based on the 25 codes and hand coding was done on the 27 written transcripts. This open coding process was done prior to running the NVivo© software and the hand coding process determined the nodes developed for running the reports.

Trustworthiness and Consistency

In qualitative research, internal validity is concerned with how well the research findings match reality and how credible the findings are. Merriam (2009) refers to internal validity and reliability as trustworthiness and consistency. In qualitative research it is vital for a researcher to feel that the results make sense and that they are consistent with the data collected. Validity and credibility in qualitative research refer to the accuracy and trustworthiness of the findings. In qualitative research, validity is concerned with determining whether the findings are accurate from the perspective of the researcher, the participants, or the reader of the study. Reliability in qualitative research refers to whether the results of one study are consistent with the data collected and if the study can be replicated at another location. Merriam (2009, p. 227) notes that several strategies can be used to "enhance the possible results of a qualitative study 'transferring'

to another setting." For the purpose of this study, personal quotes from the interviews provided first-person voices to add to the trustworthiness of the data.

The field records consisted of the audio recordings of the interviews, which are important because of pauses, small details, and comments that written notes from interviews could miss. The notes included answers used while engaging in 1- to 2-hour interviews with students and the observations about the processes and the context of the actual process. My field records also incorporated my notes about details of events at the site, personal reactions to events, and reflections about the day. All of these above-named items were field notes of the study and part of the audit trail to support reliability in the study.

A common reliability strategy used in qualitative research is the use of an audit trail. All data collection and changes were included in the audit trail I developed to describe in detail how the data was collected. This information was used to describe the process changes regarding site selection and participant recruiting and selection.

For member checks, I solicited feedback from the participants to review the accuracy of their words in the transcribed interviews and preliminary emerging themes and the written analysis. This is another strategy to ensure internal validity and consistency or trustworthiness for the data collection. Merriam (2009) points out that this gives the researcher an opportunity to ask the participants if the analysis "rings true" since it is their experiences written through the researcher's interpretation or do they feel that their words have been misinterpreted (p. 217).

The study concluded with 27 participants being interviewed and 26 working email addresses for sending transcripts to participants. This served as a member check on the accurate interpretation of what was discussed. This feedback gave the participants an opportunity to tell

the researcher whether the analysis accurately portrayed the information shared in the interviews with the researcher. After the transcriber returned a set of transcribed interviews, I emailed the transcript to the participants, who were asked to review the document and respond in a reply email within 10 to 15 days if changes were desired. I informed the participants that a reply was only necessary if changes were being sent to or being requested of me. No reply would signify the participant's acceptance of the transcribed interview as written. I received no additional edits or requests for new information to be added to interviews. Creswell (2007) says in member checking, the "researcher solicits the participants' views of the credibility of the findings and interpretation" (p. 208).

Triangulation is another strategy that uses multiple sources of data from people through observations and interviews or valid documents to compare and cross-check data through analysis. The rationale for using a variety of data collection methods is based in using a method that is a part of basic qualitative design. The use of documents in qualitative research is considered the same as interviews or observation; it is the same as being in the library surrounded by books which are voices begging to be heard, as Merriam states, citing Glaser and Strauss (1967). Merriam (2009) says from an "interpretive-constructivist perspective" that triangulation is a principal strategy for ensuring validity and reliability (p. 216). The 2012 Higher Learning Commissions Self-Study report served as a means of confirming the institutional programs and services listed on the website, in the catalog, and reported by the participants in the interviews. Creswell (2007) describes triangulation as a process that "involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective" (p. 208).

Creswell (2007) and Merriam (2007) stress the importance of prolonged engagement, building trust with the participants and the study findings as strategies for ensuring validity and reliability. Member checks, detailed field records, an audit trail, and my interpretations as part of the commentary with my findings were all used to ensure trustworthiness and reliability.

Themes

Themes that emerged from the participant interviews were the following: (1) Campus Environment: Faculty, staff, classes, and support; (2) Persistence and graduation; (3) Academic Challenges; (4) Academic Successes; (5) Personal Challenges; (6) Personal Successes; (7) Inspiration: Personal, family, colleagues, and (8) Mentors – on and off campus.

The eight themes emerged as patterns developed. Certain words and phrases appeared repeatedly in word frequency queries or paragraph node theme searches. Building the categories is a means of developing the themes, identifying patterns, and seeking answers to the research questions (Merriam, 2009).

Researcher Bias

Scholars insist that it is vital to provide the reader with clarity regarding the biases of the researcher from the outset of the study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). It is important to grant the reader of the study knowledge of my position, worldviews, theoretical orientation, and any biases or assumptions that may impact the study. Merriam (2009) notes that using the examination of researcher bias is a strategy related to maintaining the integrity of the data collected and the resulting analysis. It is therefore considered another means of ensuring internal validity or reliability. She posits that by granting the reader such clarification the researcher

allows the reader to better understand how a researcher arrived at a particular interpretation of the data (p. 219).

As a self-described constructivist and feminist who crashed color and gender barriers in two Fortune 500 companies in the 1970s, I noted the dearth of African American males at the upper levels of management. Although it has improved in the corporate context, this has also been impacted by more African American women in the corporate world. In the last 20 years, the number of African American males achieving higher education degrees has plummeted. Presently, this same scarcity that existed in the corporate world now exists for African American males as successful graduates, faculty members, or administrators. I admit to having a definite bias towards wanting to see more African American males complete their educations and be successful in various careers. I feel it is highly desirable to see more African American males advance the numbers of faculty and administration within the academy in order to provide service and support to the next generation of African American students entering the higher education pipeline.

I believe that African American males can learn and be productive, even if they have come from dire circumstances. I come from a family that placed great value on education, with many extended family members in earlier generations achieving professional degrees. While my parents had no advanced education, they made sure all of their children went to college. My sister would become my academic role model after she helped integrate a campus residence hall at the University of Illinois in the late 1950s. Many years later, she would complete two degrees at the University of Illinois.

My beliefs reflect being raised in a two-parent household in a blue- and white-collar stable residential community. I was a high-level academic achiever from elementary school through college, attending an undergraduate program at UIC on a scholarship. I moved to an upper-middle-class lifestyle due to higher education. As an African American, I understand many of the issues faced by the students and, yet, so often their struggles far surpass the context of my relatively quiet and stable life. I feel that I am both an insider and an outsider. I view myself as an insider because of having experienced my life through the contextual filters based on race and racism in America. I also feel that I'm an outsider due to my academic achievement level and economic class. This required more vigilance during interviews in order to remain non-judgmental when students described challenges they've faced. My hope was to give them some of my background and interest in this topic, and be empathetic, thus gaining the participants' trust, and make them comfortable talking with me. I hoped this helped them give me their true thoughts and feelings about their community college experience, making their stories come alive through their own words.

Summary Statement

I have explained the choice of a basic qualitative research design being selected in order to allow for detailed information from personal accounts through interviews, field notes, reflective writings, and interviews. I have outlined the procedures used for participant selection, site information, data collection process, and type of interviews used that gave participants voice to their community college-going experiences and feelings about their college. The review of extant data documents, learning community focus group reports, and college reports served as a

means of triangulation to verify information from the interviews. I have also described the comparative data analysis used in order to seek emerging themes across the data in order to answer the research questions.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter will provide a summary of three programs and discuss the themes which emerged from the study. The research study participants described three programs as having a positive impact on their community college experience: The Achievers group is a learning community for African American males, the Brothers is a campus organization that offers support and mentoring outside the classroom, and Great Thinkers is a student-led discussion group open to everyone on campus. Of the 27 participants in this study, over half of the participants were in either the Achievers, the Brothers or the Great Thinkers with several of them holding membership in one or all of the groups. The numbers indicate strong academic and social engagement factors so this chapter focuses on the participants' stories as they relate to eight themes in this study. First, a brief overview of each group will be given.

History and Overview

African American male students discussed success based on their involvement in the learning community: The Achievers (TA), a social and mentoring group, the Brothers (TB), and a topical discussion group called the Great Thinkers (GT). A brief description of each group follows.

The Achievers

The Achievers learning community was designed to support African American male students attending Midwest College who tested into and were enrolled in reading, English, and

math developmental courses. This academic program was funded by a 2010 internal grant to support the development and implementation of a college-wide first-year experience program (FYE). The FYE program included a student cohort of first-semester students taking all their courses together with specific instructors, study group hours, office hours, and supported social activities. The program also included a face-to-face new student orientation and a fall welcome convocation for new and returning students.

The learning academy team included hand-picked faculty, an academic advisor, tutors and academy team administrators, and incorporated a case management approach to discussing the students' progress in weekly meetings. This was coupled with a new advisor for the Brothers, creating a group mentoring model using community/business leaders and university undergraduate and graduate students.

The Brothers

The Brothers group has existed on the campus for over 15 years in various formats. The advisor, who led the group for close to 10 years, described the group as a support and information sharing group for African American males on campus. As a student organization within the Student Life Department, membership is open to all males of African descent. Because the advisor believed in a hands-off approach and a constant change in student leadership, memberships and program planning varied from year to year. In 2013, the advising leadership changed and the Brothers became the official social component of the Achievers. Within a year of this change, the Brothers organization re-established campus-wide membership instead of Achievers-only membership.

Great Thinkers

Great Thinkers was a student-created organization that viewed its mission as providing an open forum for discussion on any topic that the student members selected. The group started in 2013 by posting signs in student lounge areas and the college center, inviting students to join a discussion forum. The Great Thinkers group was organized by a charismatic young man who encouraged students to come together and discuss issues of importance to them, whether it was related to academics, current social issues, or controversies. These sessions were held in one of the larger meeting rooms. Faculty and staff were invited to participate so they could add to the dialog and as an opportunity for them to interact with the students. The meetings started rather small, with 5-10 students per meeting, and within a month the discussion forum had grown to 30-40 students, with staff and faculty occasionally participating. The Great Thinkers was an opportunity for young men to be critical thinkers, find themselves, and help the men remain in school.

A Collaboration: The Achievers Learning Academy and the Brothers

The Achievers

In 2010 The Achievers Learning Academy was developed as part of an internal grant program designed to provide new collaborative projects on campus. The learning community was one of four components within the first-year experience (FYE) project.

The FYE project was developed as the result of a year-long task force which determined that students' first year experience needed to be a college-wide priority. The goal of the FYE was to create a coordinated program to help a diverse group of first-year students transition to the

college and aid them in understanding the academic and behavior expectations in order to be successful (Midwest Innovations Grant, 2010). The desired outcome was to enhance the students' first-year experience in order to increase their retention, fall-to-fall semester persistence, and degree/certificate completion and transfer rate. The implementation plans included an extended orientation over the course of the year with on- and off-campus contact, a welcome convocation, a revised college success course, and specialized learning communities.

The first cohort of the Achievers Learning Community at Midwest College started in the fall 2011 semester. During the initial year of the Achievers, mentoring or regular social engagement were not part of the program. During the initial semester, the Achievers cohort attended all of its classes together in a coordinated schedule which included a developmental Reading, English, and Political Science course. The Achievers were not enrolled in the developmental Math course for fall. In its place the students were enrolled in a non-credit Math module to increase the students' math exposure prior to taking math in the second semester. The idea was to increase their skills and possibly have them place into a higher developmental course for the spring semester.

The Achievers' first-semester class schedule was designed to increase students' efficacy regarding college coursework. Faculty selected for the program were committed to working with the students in and out of class and serving on an advisory group with the academic advisors in order to case manage the cohort. This group met every two weeks throughout the semester, led by the Academic division dean who was responsible for writing the internal grant. In the meetings the faculty, advisors, and program support staff discussed students' class progress with

the faculty, issues and challenges involving the students' transition to college, and some of the personal challenges acclimating to living away from home and in a new community.

Once the Achievers cohort started their second semester, they were separated by major and courses, yet they continued to be supported and engaged in some group activities at the start and end of the semester. With the start of the fall 2012 Achievers' cohort, several changes were made. The changes included collaborating with the Brothers, which required the young men to attend mandatory study halls/tables and the bi-weekly Brothers' meetings. This made the Achievers Learning Community a more comprehensive academic, advising, and social engagement support system for the first-year students. This practice emphasized institutional support in academic and social integration with lots of good advising, tutoring, and quality faculty interactions being key to the students' chances of persistence, especially in the first year, when their attachment is tenuous and the institutional hold is the weakest (Tinto, 2002).

At the end of each year, the cohorts participated in a focus group, where they shared information about their experiences. The cohort discussed needing more time together both academically and socially, asked for additional mentoring, and requested help with time management and study skills.

Frank, a member of the first Achievers cohort, summed it up this way:

> That's when it kinda went down because we weren't in the classes anymore. We were in maybe, you know together, just one or two classes… It wasn't all of us in all our classes together, you know, cause everyone had … different degrees and different majors. You'd go to class looking forward to seeing everybody in a class you had together and then go to other classes without any of the others and you'd say "Oh wow, I don't have anyone to be my study partner." The second year attending Midwest we kinda fell off. We didn't have no person to depend on us to do this assignment in class and let's get together to study over it together and not having that it was kinda hard to break. It was like you were addicted to it.

The 2011 and 2012 Achievers cohorts consisted of a mix of 70% out-of-district high school graduates and 30% in-district high school graduates (TWA data report). Due to extensive promotion of the Achievers Learning Academy, the 2013 and 2014 cohorts consisted of a 60/40 and 50/50 ratio, respectively, of out-of-district to in-district high schools. These cohorts had more structure and learning support in a front-loaded college success class, First Year Experience (FYE) 101, taught in restricted sections by the advisors for the Brothers' organization.

With guidance and encouragement from the faculty and the advisors, the FYE course provided the students an understanding of intrusive time management and study skills and why they were learning about these. They were also having more opportunities to discuss career options and appropriate majors for the undecided students. The FYE course also provided the Achievers with strategies for approaching and building rapport with their non-cohort faculty, giving them confidence in seeking assistance from and developing relationships with faculty outside the Achievers' Program. The students in the Achievers shared a bond with their faculty both in and out of the classroom. The participants' positive feedback about faculty and staff support was reflected in similar responses from the end-of-year Achievers' 2011- 2013 focus group reports I reviewed. These were provided by G. Square, an academic advisor who worked with the learning community (personal communication, August 27, 2015). He worked with the Institutional Research department to develop data reports on the cohorts for the project. In response to a question asking them about shared experiences in the program, the Achievers shared their feelings about faculty members, the program events, and support. One said, "Enjoy

the teachers' enthusiasm towards the students. It seems like they really enjoy teaching us and really want us to learn." Another Achiever commented, "Like the way that teachers are engaging with us and their commitment in seeing us being successful. In high school, I never had any teachers caring about me succeeding academically."

The 2011 focus group was asked to discuss what activities and events they found useful in the Achievers and the Brothers. One of the Achievers/Brothers members explained the uniqueness of the whole experience.

> Hanging out in the Hobo outing, hiking and sitting out eating with a bunch of men was a unique experience. The whole experience has been different for me because I did not grow up around a lot of males; it just wasn't the main thing for me to do. I was always iffy about hanging around a lot of men. However, being in this program has allowed me the confidence to go to older males and have a legitimate conversation with them without feeling like they are going to lead me astray. I always had my mother to talk to and other women because I felt they knew best. Dr. F for example is a strong Black male. I really never had seen that before. This experience is really different and almost freaked me out, but it's cool.

Another of the members described his thoughts about the Brothers.

> The Brothers is something that is greatly needed. It's educational to the extent that it is like a class and that we are all learning from one another. It provides a forum for all to have a voice and be heard. The Brothers allows for us to reflect and verbalize about how we are doing in the classroom and remind us to be the best.

In response to the question, how they felt their experiences differed from those who were not in the Achievers and Brothers programs, the men offered these comments:

> Outside of the program, you have the brothers on the streets. The mindset is different between those in the program and those outside of the program. The program allows for a more positive direction to obtaining your goals.

Another commented,

> The intellectual connection keeps us motivated. When one of the brothers in the group obtain[s] a good grade…I don't want to be on top of them, but I want to be competitive. When they get "B's" I want to get "A's."

G. Square (personal communication, August 2015), one of the advisors for the Achievers, shared documents which enabled me to confirm the three-year trend for the cohorts' fall-to-fall persistence rates in comparison to the non-Achievers. I was able to view the improvement in completing the developmental course sequences and the improved grade-point averages. I also received and reviewed the 2011 and 2013 focus group reports for the Achievers. The comments were very similar to those heard throughout the interviews in this study. The men talked about positive engagement with instructors who taught them with enthusiasm and served as their cheerleaders throughout the semester. One response in the focus group report noted the committed support from the faculty.

> Mrs. P., she was my biggest cheerleader. Every time when she thinks [*sic*] I was down she would cheer me up and offer to help me. In high school, I never really experienced teachers willing to help me out. I was surprised to discover that teachers were willing to help you out and care about your success …. One of my instructors told me I was going to make a great lawyer. I don't know where he got that from (I certainly did not see it). Me? That made me happy! No male has ever told me that I was going to make it like that.

The high level of positive comments on faculty interaction was corroborated by the 2012 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). In the 2012 CCSSE Key Findings report, Midwest College scored 5 percentage points ahead of its entire 2012 CCSSE community college cohort on the faculty-student interaction benchmark.

The students involved in the Achievers and the Brothers connected with faculty members who tried to relate to them in and out of the classroom. Many participants spoke of instructors

encouraging them and helping them connect to campus resources, going out of their way to help them problem solve and offering major and career advice.

Learning communities and collaborative learning programs help non-traditional and first-generation students in their academic integration and increase the bond to their community college. The learning community is one means of providing much-needed supplemental support that is not marginalized to provide basic skills for the higher risk students who often work, care for families, and remain on campus using resources fewer hours (Tinto, 1997, 2002).

The Brothers

One critique of learning communities is they are unable to produce a lasting transformative effect on students (Clayton, 2011), and it may be unrealistic to expect lasting impact once students leave the cohort. Sending the Achievers to join the Brothers added an additional layer to the cohort by giving them more opportunities to stay connected beyond their academic classes. They would engage in social activities with their faculty and other African American males from both on and off the campus. One of the strengths of the Brothers campus organization was the multiple socioeconomic and educational backgrounds of the students. The mix of participants included those in the learning community, high-achieving students in a priority admissions program to the nearby four-year university, second-year students, transfer students. and first-generation students, all from vastly different socioeconomic backgrounds. The caring people beyond their Achievers learning community cohort created a network of students, faculty, and staff to bond with and be accountable to about their class attendance, study time, and commitment to seeking learning support in the academic center. This cohesive group enhanced

the students' sense of belonging, which helped increase their level of academic and social integration (Hausmann et al., 2007).

Under new leadership, the Brothers reinstated open membership that welcomed all African American males on the Midwest campus and created a support network for men from various socioeconomic and academic backgrounds. The students started suggesting social activities such as a fall kick-off lunch and welcome social event for new members, service learning projects, and an end-of-year picnic celebration. Other suggestions included transforming the informal structure into a more structured student organization. This new format offered group mentoring, information about transfer programs, resume workshops, career path workshops, and information about resources both on and off campus.

The Brothers group also received group mentoring from minority graduate students who attended their annual kick-off picnic and came to their weekly meetings. Members of the local Rotary Clubs and the Chamber of Commerce committed to regularly attend the Brothers' meetings to provide the students with career information and group mentoring support. Along with the business leaders and service organizations, members from various African American Greek letter fraternities, and undergraduate and doctoral students from the nearby university also served as mentors and support for the members of the Brothers.

The Brothers Engaging with the Achievers

Members of the Achievers were encouraged to join the Brothers, which changed the group's dynamic because they were no longer interacting only with students taking developmental courses. The Brothers had members who were in college-level courses; some

members were in career certificate or degree programs. Other members were in transfer programs and university-path programs with guaranteed transfer into a specific college upon graduation from Midwest. This mix of students formed strong bonds based on "lifting each other up." Clearly these participants and other students shared a common goal—academic success—and used their engagement in the Brothers as a means of motivating each other. Several of the participants in this study were involved in both the Achievers and the Brothers.

The participants viewed their faculty, staff, and peers in both the Achievers and the Brothers organization as, not only their academic community, but as another "family" who listened, and provided support and guidance. Jeffrey described the Achievers, "Yes. That is a group of 15 Black men whose classes are all together because we just try to stay together, work together, and achieve together."

Nick described the connection between the Achievers to the Brothers group this way:

> Okay, like, I started school here like maybe three semesters ago, so that was the Achievers and then as that progressed they introduced us to another organization, which was the Brothers. So that helped me a lot… They stayed on us about homework, like they always do … and that helped me going through to my other semesters.

Clearly, the association between the Achievers and the Brothers helped strengthen the bonds of the learning community cohort, while providing support to all of the participants who engaged in the Brothers' bi-weekly meetings. The same-race peer support enhanced the quality of their experiences while providing encouragement for academic achievement.

Despite some literature (Majors and Billson [1992] on Black masculinities that questioned the ability of African America males to connect in a nonathletic situation due to the

lack of "coolness" and the ability to work collaboratively in all-male scenarios), the Achievers', Brothers', and Great Thinkers' "tight knit" groups formed bonds that strengthened their connection with each other and their college commitment. These students welcomed the men who came to mentor them and worked willingly to support each other achieve academic and engagement goals. The findings in this study supported recent literature which noted the positive impact on African American male undergraduates when mentored by Black Greeks and high achieving student leaders (Harper, 2005, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Herndon & Hirt, 2004).

Themes

This section provides a discussion of the themes that emerged from the data analysis: (1) Campus Environment: Faculty, staff, class and support; (2) Persistence and graduation; (3) Academic Challenges; (4) Academic Successes; (5) Personal Challenges; (6) Personal Successes; (7) Inspiration: (personal, family, colleagues) and (8) Mentors – on and off campus.

These themes help to answer the four research questions that informed and guided this research study. Use of verbatim examples provides the essence of the participants' experiences. The questions will be discussed in the next chapter.

Campus Environment

Faculty and Staff

This theme focused on students' perceptions of their campus environment, which, for the purpose of this study, is defined by their interactions with faculty, staff, classes, support, and institutional engagement. Several of the study participants who were not active with any of the three groups readily commented on relying on people such as a counseling staff member in the

student services area to help them with advice**.** Simon, a 21-year-old transfer program student, talked about feeling comfortable reaching out to instructors for assistance.

> I feel if I have any problems or questions, they're usually in reference to what topics we're going over in class, and I go to my instructors' office hours. And they're very insightful, well-mannered individuals, I don't have any problems whatsoever, and it's always a good thing to do regarding your education and what grades you're receiving within the curriculum, and that should set the standard for each particular student. Going to the instructors for questions and help is the way it should be. Most students *should* feel that way.

These participants described faculty, support service areas and administrators who they felt were readily accessible for questions, advice, and support.

> Warren, a 21- year old graphic design student, described the sense of community he felt.
>
> There are times at four-year institutions, larger institutions, where you may not even know the professor or even half of the students in your class. In here, with our majors, we get to know the people in our classes, our teachers, and we move along with them throughout the whole program.

<u>Support</u>

> Kevin, a 61-year-old graduating student, described the people who helped him feel supported on campus.
>
> Starting with the personnel in Counseling and Advising. When you enter, they are eager and helpful and encouraging and any detail they give it importance as if it's important to you. They want to solve that. Moving on to the instruction, all the instructors are very forthcoming by inviting us to email or visit, any questions always very open invitation to do that. The occasions I did it, seek a little extra help, it was very much there. The support for academic achievement such as remedial help that you might need was very much available here. It's constantly being put forward so you'll be aware of it. Also, even support for when you … I had a personal issue here just a couple of weeks ago and it affected two of my classes and both my instructors were very helpful in helping me work my way through that. So I have high praises for all aspects of the college. I can't think of any negative things that impact the environment of teaching.

Calvin, a freshman student government member, described how accessible people were for help and getting advice.

> I feel I can talk to the president of the school and get advice. I did talk to him before. He's actually scheduled meetings with the students in student government and sat with us to talk. I actually met him before I came here to school … he seemed really nice and like a cool person. I found him really easy to talk to and he's been willing to talk with me. I feel I can go to him when I need some advice. Yes, yes, I did talk go talk with the director of student life, the vice president of student services, the college president, I've talked to all of them before and they all encouraged me to get more involved and run for office … but I decided to wait because I needed to focus on my time management so I can keep my G.P.A. up. I plan to you know, run for office later and get more involved because I do want to represent our students and help them.

Quentin described which staff person in the tutoring center he relied on for questions and advice: "Mrs. T., in A120, she's a good person to talk to. That's who I usually talk to if I have any questions. Then I can't really think about it but a lot of the student tutors there help out too."

Alan described how his Business Agriculture program advisor and some Midwest counselors had helped him.

> You know that K., he helps me out when I need to talk about problems in school or in my life. When I was young, I used to pretend I had all the answers and would not ask for help. Now, when I can't figure something out or have problems, I open up to others and find people so helpful. He helps me figure things out or sends me to the right people. D., with the glasses upstairs, is really nice. He doesn't tell me what I want to hear, but what I need to hear to help me on solving my problems. The African brother, J., one day I told him about some situations and he got on the phone to make calls to help me out. It helps to know that people care about you and what happens to you.

I heard numerous remarks from participants who were in the Achievers, the Brothers and Great Thinkers, that Midwest College was a welcoming environment. They commented on how easy the friendly atmosphere made it for them to ask questions and seek support for academic, social, and personal issues.

Jeffrey, who held membership in all of the above-named groups, was explicit in his feelings about who he felt comfortable going to when he had questions or concerns and why he felt comfortable seeking support on the Midwest campus.

> I wanna [*sic*] say Mr. B. and Mr. and Mrs. T. because before I even rolled in, just talking to them over the phone, they said just call or come to them for anything, anything I needed … yeah, I'm comfortable here. Actually, last year when I first graduated high school, me and my brother did a year at [names another community college] and we hated it, because it was terrible. Like the atmosphere, the people wasn't as friendly as they were here … I feel much more comfortable at Midwest. I made more friends; yeah, it's a much nicer environment.

As the discussion moved to what students liked the best at Midwest Community College and what influenced their comfort level within the environment, the discussion moved from faculty to staff and student interactions.

Staff

Kevin noted how competent the staff was. "I like the personnel of the college and I feel that they're all very competent." The most-repeated descriptors concerning the staff were *helpful*, *friendly*, and *kind*. Alan, a non-traditional student in his fifties, described how helpful he felt people were on campus:

> Just like that lady just now. She (VP of academic services) didn't have to stop to help me when I said I couldn't find my paper on the computer just now, but she helped me out. People here aren't caught up in being important. I like how the instructors will give you one-on-one attention and share insights and gave me tools to succeed. The people here are genuine and not hung up on having titles. If you can't succeed here it's because of your attitude and not using the resources that are offered.

Gene, a first-year student, talked about who he finds helpful:

> I like that the staff members are very helpful, very involved. Specific names like Ms. T. and Mr. T. Everyone at A120, because A120 is very helpful. All around

> the campus everyone is very helpful. If you need help, they won't hesitate to help you. That's probably the best thing at Midwest, is every staff member is very helpful. The least that I like about Midwest, that's tough 'cause I really love Midwest. Well it's the only college I've ever been to, but so far I really love Midwest.

The essence of the campus environment theme was whether students perceived their campus environment as inclusive and welcoming. As they described their comfort level, phrases like "very comfortable," "quite comfortable," "safe," and "I feel comfortable around Midwest" were repeated often. Evan said, "On this campus? Very comfortable; I feel as though I live here." Many of the participants described the staff as friendly and helpful while also noting the diverse student body and how well students interacted with each other in and out of classes. Gene summed up his feelings about his comfort level, "Yes, I feel comfortable. I feel safe here. Yeah, I feel real comfortable here. I interact with students very well, got good friendships here with everyone. Yeah, there's nothing I really dislike about Midwest."

Classes

The majority of participants spoke positively about student interaction in classes and on campus with different races/ethnicities and international students. A majority of the participants noted the ease of interaction in study groups, as well as students interacting with one another individually across racial, ethnic and international lines. A number of participants discussed having new experiences with international students from Asia, Africa, India, Australia, and South America.

Aldon, commenting on the diversity of the campus, said: "The environment is okay, sometimes it's kind of odd being around different diversities … it's new and it's just the odd part," while David thought the diversity was beneficial.

> I guess, well, what you could say I like the best here is the diversity of people here. There's a lot of diversity that you can get into here. I like meeting people from everywhere ... I'm from a different area. Seeing different people from all different races. That was awesome … Yah, getting to meet and know more different types of people and cultures and how they look at things, as well.

Michael reflected on how different Midwest was from his high school.

> It's just like I feel comfortable, like, a lot of Black people, a lot of White people, a lot of Mexicans. It's just ... it's a lot of people in one building, and it's like there ain't no conflict or nothing. There ain't no fights breakin' out. Like with my old high school it weren't a lot of Blacks, but it was a lot of Whites and Mexicans, so a lot of fights. But it is just like I feel comfortable, like everybody's here for a reason.

Calvin talked about the diversity of the campus opening up new experiences for students:

> Like I said earlier, I grew up here in the area in a really diverse environment and that has been really good for me and it helps to see that same type of thing at Midwest. Midwest is a very diverse place where you meet students from so many walks of life. It's really interesting to meet new people and communicate with different types of people so Midwest has, I feel, like a really great campus. Especially for people who come from small towns. It helps them to see and know people from lots of backgrounds, different colors … Growing up in small towns restricts what they know is out there, so Midwest really helps them broaden their horizons.

Several participants in this study shared experiences of facing more scrutiny, stereotypes, and fearful reactions when moving about the community or on the nearby university campus. Blake said he realized that he's rather tall, being over 6 feet in height, and people sometimes react strongly to his physical presence.

"I notice female Caucasians, they get kinda scared like, when I'm walking on one side of the street they always cross the street, or they get to jogging for no reason." He described this

type of reaction as someone seeing him and starting to jog a block ahead of him to their apartment building, even in the middle of winter. He summed it up by saying that he's now getting used to this type of reaction when on the university campus or moving about the community. The general impression based on the participants' comments was that the Midwest campus was both more welcoming and accepting of them than the general community.

Persistence and Graduation

This theme incorporated several subthemes of campus engagement and activities, student engagement and support, academic and career advising, and learning support resources as strategies to increase more completion. It focused on what participants viewed as the institutional commitment to increase student academic and social engagement in order to increase persistence and completion. The theme touched on many items students believed helped create program completion and successful transfer to four-year institutions.

Academic and Career Information

Several of the participants, who were graduating or transferring at the end of the semester, indicated the need to help new students understand the stressors of college prior to mid-terms. Some of the participants talked about helping new students understand how to handle the rigorous pace of college compared to high school.

Warren talked about what he felt could help a new student handle the pace of college.

> One of the most things that I realized for me personally is that I would like more encouragement from my teachers. I know that when we can check our grades on Cobra, [educational platform] honestly, I don't even know how many students actually do that sometimes, but just knowing from my teachers that I'm on the right path and doing good will help me and create a more positive outlook on what I'm doing in the class, and

> encouragement from family, friends, and teachers would also encourage me and my peers to want to go to a four-year institution.

The participants also desired more "cultural capital": the knowledge of navigating the system, expectations, and social know-how. They wanted the college's support services, organizations, and programs to guide them as they entered college with more help choosing majors, developing study and time management skills, and learning how to transfer to a four-year college or university. They desired that the cultural capital be shared earlier to better prepare students for the rigors of college and the expectations for focus and sacrifice needed in order to succeed**.**

Tyson commented on learning more about majors and careers.

> Or even have, you know, like one representative from each major come in specific days throughout the years [in classes] and come and actually talk to the students. They have that now but it's more like science fair kind of stuff. But yeah, just have a lot more availability in careers.

In discussing how to help more of the men complete their academic goals, some of the participants emphasized the need to help them identify their career goal and academic major. They described it as helping them to visualize and achieve their career objectives by successfully selecting a major and completing their academic major goals.

<u>Career and Academic Planning</u>

Robert focused his comments on having a plan and choosing a major:

> I would say, outlining a full plan from the get-go. Because a lot of people lose motivation very quickly, but that's because they're just, a lot of people, especially straight out of high school and then community colleges, this is like the next step of going through the motions … you have to make your own life decisions for the first time and that's scary. So, you get here and at some point you're going to

> have to make that first life decision, but this is the time where you should be taking to planning, and it's hard to plan that for the first time, or it's hard to know what the best route is to go … So helping them choose a major. I'm not sure what percentage of people are undecided, but I'm pretty sure it's pretty high. So helping them choose a major, you know, maybe if there's some material out there, if they do choose a major, show them what job opportunities there are so they can start thinking about where they actually want to wind up at the end. 'Cause at the end of the day, you know, school is a means to an end, like, you don't want to stick around here.

Blake commented on the importance of planning for a successful academic future, "basically as far as academics, just register for classes that you really want to take, it's going to help you. Don't just register just to be registered. Find out what you want to do to be successful in life."

The participants talked about wanting this type of help with an educational plan early on in order to help them focus on major and career goals. Several of the participants remarked about the need for stronger guidance for educational and career planning. Casey talked about researching a major and making sure it's a good fit. "Make sure you go into the right major, 'cause if not you will waste even financial aid or your personal money, for nothing."

One of the comments from the 2013 Achievers focus group was "more help in learning about careers and developing a career plan." One student suggested that as students are finishing the Achievers' program, students should be required to meet with the career center for advising and developing a career plan.

Multiple comments were given by participants about how important it is for college to help students understand the rigor and pace of community college, and the "grit" (Duckworth, Patterson, Matthews, & Kelley, 2007; Strayhorn, 2013) and determination needed to be successful. Grit is described as the perseverance and passion for long-term goals. It entails

working strenuously over years, maintaining interest and effort while enduring challenges and failures (Duckworth et al. 2007). Strayhorn's (2013) research emphasizes that "grittier" behaviors in minority students leads to improved academic self-efficacy and performance.

Academic Expectations

Gene described his busy routine. "When I just started college it was 20 [hours I worked per week], 'cause that's what they tell you, do only 20 hours a week." He went on to say, "…. now I'm down to 10 hours here and I get like 25 hours at Rural Mart, and my internship is about 6 hours a week." He then said he was carrying a schedule of 14 credit hours.

Casey said the college expectations are different from high school:

> Yeah, 'cause I meant college is not like high school; nowhere near. I took a lot of AP courses in high school, and when I got here it was totally different. I mean, you really have to put forth effort in yourself to actually pass any class you take, whether it's just a math class or an English class, you have to put forth that effort … okay I'm gonna lollygag, I'm gonna do this last paper the last two days, when I know in actual reality, you can't do that in college, you have to take time in writing well, pre-writing and keep overlooking and stuff like that. In college, they set you up for life, in general. They said high school's good, but college really lets you know if you want to be successful in life, because it brings so many barriers to you, that you have no choice: either you're going to fall or you're going to go through it.

Owen emphasized the importance of learning to handle multiple priorities:

> Juggling everything. Trying to stay on top. Assignments, work, rest. Trying to stay organized. Trying to stay motivated and not giving up. They have the classes you want to major in. That['s] good for your career … but it's not like high school to where the teacher will push you to achieve what you're trying to achieve. Basically the teachers here, they give you … a helping hand, but they don't really grab you to teach you, to sit you down. So, you're trying to figure out how to transition yourself from this kid-type figure into going into adulthood, at the same time juggling parties and your interests outside of school … Come up into the real life …

Jeffrey, a criminal justice major who transferred from another community college, reflected on the amount of work and the faster pace:

> Yeah, everybody, all your teachers, just somehow… just throw everything at once, throw everything at you at once and they have to be due around the same time, within the same day, the next day and things like that. Yeah, that's a lot of pressure. That's one, kind of the one big challenge I have. Mostly all the work having to be done at the same time. Like man, do you have any other … deadline days? Uhm, yeah, it's more faster [*sic*] paced than high school.

Several of the men acknowledged that some of their friends called community college the 13th grade. Kevin said he left his community college years earlier, because "I was just wasting time." Robert attended a community college near his area high school before attending Midwest.

> I mean, it was a lot more of a high school-feel to it. It could've been because I'm taking more math-based classes now over something, I mean I guess it could be a lot of different factors into it, also it was within a couple of miles from my high school so maybe that could have attributed to it. But I do feel like the mood here is more serious overall than at the other community college.

Calvin said his viewpoint changed once he started attending Midwest.

> I felt like people were, "Oh, he's just going to Midwest because that's what everybody else does and anybody can go to Midwest." Coming here I got a whole different feel about it. I got to definitely see what it's all about and a reason why they may have had the perception because it offers this great opportunity to everybody…. You don't really see that at the four-year universities or prestigious schools…. because this is a good college and it's so convenient for so many people financially.

The participants emphasized how tough the classes were at Midwest and wanted their friends and incoming high school students to understand the need to be focused and prepared for the hard work and fast pace. David noted the importance of staying on track:

> I guess that when you come here you have to keep control of work and keep track of everything that you're doing but also keep in a sense that you're in school too, in mind. You do get busy sometimes, you back track but you have to keep it all together.

A few of the students said they were glad they went to work before attending college because they didn't understand the commitment and determination needed for going to college, and working helped them see the value of getting an education.

Drake was one of those who worked in high school and kept the same job after graduating:

> By the time I, like, started in the beginning of college … I had a different kind of mind frame in the beginning. I never knew what college was really about since I came out of high school. I didn't really go straight to college out of high school I had a two-year break … Yes, I've been working for Wendy's for five years. It's been very hard on me trying to do employment and … working a lot when I was in high school.

Robert reflected on being glad to be back at Midwest after working for four years:

> … well, I'm 28 so, you know, I've been working and just doing random stuff off and on, not going to school, and it's so much different coming back to this academic setting that like I just enjoy intelligent conversations at this point.

Tyson talks about taking a year off between high school and college:

> My college experience? I didn't go to college right after high school; I took a year off. I've seen a lot within the year off, based on how people fail, how people achieve, and you know how people just get stopped. I seen all that through the work life, so I experience the work life first. Me coming to college, I see how, I see like why people decide to do some of the things they do, which is leave and don't come back, or even finish … Taking the time off from school has helped me mature because throughout the whole year I just kept saying to myself, if I can get in, I can do it. And that's just always what I told myself. If I can just get in school, I could do it.

Evan wanted people to understand the reality versus television-show version of college:

> Well, I'll most likely ask them this: are you really serious about going to school? Because if you're not, don't sign up for it. Because what you see on MTV or whatever reality television show, is not what you're going to get here. You're going to be writing essays, you're gonna have to turn in assignments on time,

> correct. You're going to be staying up late working on assignments, probably skip a couple of classes in order to get one assignment done. Now I'm not saying go around just skipping classes, but if you know something's due and you know it's gotta [*sic*] be due in a certain amount of time, you better get to it.

The study participants seemed to be aware of college expectations and knew they were going to be challenged, face rigorous academic standards and were going to develop values, skills and work ethics that would help them become academically successful and productive community members. One participant, Warren, who had attended Midwest, and Jeffrey, who had attended a nearby community college and then left college to work, shared the same view about "not getting it" at first and "not being focused."

Warren admitted to not being focused and how he failed his freshman year:

> Here, it's made me more responsible because of me failing my freshman year, and a little bit more older and wiser, and I've been able to just really focus on my schoolwork and take it seriously as it should've been with my freshman year because I know people who change their majors all the time, but I rarely see people change their majors because they fail at it. It has really helped me understand and be able to focus and harness it, and really enjoy it.

Harry reflected on the financial repercussions he encountered from not being focused:

> Yep, and those students who aren't getting good grades, we need to go and get them involved so we can help them 'cause they don't understand that they're wasting money … I'm a perfect example of that [losing financial aid]. I messed up and that's why I'm paying for classes now. After this semester, I should be getting it back. Last term I had a 3.3 G.P.A. and grades are looking good now … Sometimes, you have to lose to win …I had to go through that, but I don't want others to have to go through that … Because it's hard … You really, really need to focus.

Other ideas discussed were ways to keep students motivated and focused on their long-range goals. David said, "More motivation," while Ben offered, "that little push …" meaning more support out of the classrooms. The general consensus was that many of the young men entering

community college lack direction, adequate role models and a clear understanding of the rigors of college coursework.

Campus Engagement and Activities

The social engagement of the Brothers provided the Achievers the opportunity to engage with a group of young men who were positive and focused on being academically successful. To make sure members of Brothers and Achievers were successful, they helped build academic "grit," motivated each other, and held each other accountable, Nick, Frank, Tyson and others commented about the Brothers and Mister B. staying on them about their homework and keeping each other accountable.

One of the Achievers gave this response during a 2011 focus group session.

> The Brothers is something that is greatly needed: It's educational to the extent that it's like a class and we're all learning from one another. It provides a forum for all to have a voice and be heard. The Brothers allows us to reflect and verbalize about how we are doing in the classroom and remind us to be the best.

Frank and several other participants discussed the importance of being engaged and involved with student clubs and organizations. They suggested administrators, faculty, and advisors explore ways to make it "cool" enough for students to join and see the possibilities they offer.

David talked about communicating with students in classes while pointing out the need for ways to connect students outside of classes.

> I guess you could say more social gathering to meet one another … like more socials, mingling like things for people with the same major. You could just come in and mingle and talk and meet more people … not just for African Americans, but people in your major in general.

Calvin, who was active in Great Thinkers, student government, and the international student organization, talked about creating more excitement about campus engagement:

> They have this international students' organization here. I've been to a couple of their meetings and I can get a real perspective of what it feels like for them growing up in America. They're interested in gaining skills from the American education system, and this topic interests me. This is one situation that I've encountered that's made me more comfortable. So, this experience has really made me like Midwest and all the different organizations and opportunities for students

> I feel that any organization is available for someone to join or develop an interest in, but personally for African Americans I see quite a few. The Brothers is a good group for supporting one another. Good speakers and chance to talk with other people like you. The Great Thinkers is a super organization that offers people the chance to check out anything. They come together, students, faculty and staff to talk about all kinds of thing, globally or nationally ...

The young men who were involved in the Achievers, the Brothers and Great Thinkers talked about how these organizations helped them understand the value of being involved. Peter reflected on having a group like Great Thinkers on his campus:

> The biggest thing was a guy came up to me and was talking about this organization called "Great Thinkers" and for me, it was, they're like sharing my own philosophy about things. I like to help people out one person at a time and with Midwest, like I said before, you get all that.

Robert commented on what a solid group of people were involved with the Great Thinkers:

> Okay, so I believe Great Thinkers is the one I'm thinking about now, and even though it's open to anybody, it's primarily African Americans …. Yeah, no, so they seem like a good, solid group of people and they really seem like they support each other in doing whatever they're doing and, I don't know, they seem all around good. You know, I've only sat in on a few of their different things, and yeah, I think I might have given them my email address or something at some point.

Frank spoke of enjoying the discussion and encouragement to be a free thinker:

> As far as Great Thinkers goes, it's just a great organization to go to that lets you be a free thinker. You express your opinion about a certain subject that been playing in your mind and you get to talk about it freely with others and see how they react to it. See if they have input on it as well. It's like debating in a way but it's just having these philosophical questions and real-life questions you can entertain.

Some of the participants remarked about not being able to be active on campus due to work, class, or family obligations, but were aware of the organizations and clubs. Owen explained that his hectic schedule did not allow for engaging in activities, "can't get involved … when not in class or working 30 hours … and have a break, I go to the library."

Non-traditional students like Alan often informally share experiences with the younger students. Alan was a 54-year-old student enrolled in a program in order to start his own landscaping business. He described his early life as an angry one and being "in and out of jail since I was 17."

> You see living in jail wasn't living at all. I change my view of doing time. The excuses had to go because I had to redefine what life is and how to live it. I had put myself in the situations that caused me pain because of the anger, pain, and choices I had felt and made. I decided to change my mind and change my life.

He spoke of being resourceful in the wrong things and realized that he could "be resourceful and use it for positive reasons." He said he talked to the young men in the Brothers, who called him "Pops" and he wanted to "help give the young men some hope and direction." He spoke of the need for the young men to understand what it's all about …that they don't always have to act so tough. They just want to be heard." He insisted that "We need more people to get involved and help them."

As the participants talked about the challenges of juggling time and energy it became clear that many of them faced limitations in their ability to be active in organizations or even socially engaged on campus. As I listened to their descriptions of trying to have it all, it became apparent that many of the students could not fit one more item into their schedule. The welcoming and supportive club and campus environment would not change their reality**.**

Throughout the study, participants who were involved in organizations talked about the importance of helping students understand why they should also participate in service learning projects, student government, student employment and clubs or organizations.

Peter talked about the Great Thinkers.

> Like I said, Great Thinkers is another organization where we try to build leaders of tomorrow, more so create community through conversation. We have discussions every Wednesday, talking about the smallest of things to the most complex of things. Another group, I do believe, is the Brothers.

During the interviews, the participants suggested community colleges should capitalize on identifying the African American males who come to campus with "their stuff together." These would be students focused on their academic plans and strong academic efficacy. These students should be recruited to receive leadership development so they can guide student clubs, organizations, and peer networking. These leaders can set the pace and create the energy within the college culture, making studying, attending class, and getting good grades a positive thing for African American males.

Learning Support Resources

The best practices for learning support resources focus on helping the students with compassion, ease of access, use of various modalities for instruction and tutoring, all without

penalizing them for arriving at the campus underprepared for college-level course work. Most of the students in this study, whether in the Achievers or not, were very aware of the learning support resources available at Midwest College and were very comfortable seeking assistance and services. Aldon described his feelings about the assistance on campus. "I like the help that we have. There's a lot of places that you can go to, to get the help you need in different subjects, and those other places."

Harry appreciated access to computers in the library to do his homework:

> I stay on campus when I don't have a class, I go to the library to get some work done, extra work that I need to get done so the computers and all that stuff are a big help in getting the work done because my computer is broke so I don't have one right now. It makes it easier to get the work done.

The majority of participants talked about using the Academic Center, A120, for studying, tutoring, and writing assistance. The services included help through a writing center, computer availability, individual study rooms, and a module course learning area. This center has received national awards for its best practices in offering students exceptional learning support services.

Tyson, a Sociology major, described using the Academic Center:

> Outside of class, when I'm on campus, I'm usually always doing my homework. Like I have in between time to do my homework, since I am a student and I work almost about 45 hours a week, so I try to get my work in between classes, even if it's just ten minutes.

Jeffrey spoke of his reason for using A120, "Do my homework, in A120. Mostly, most of all get help with my math. Mostly."

Blake described the availability of resources on the campus: "… it's a lot of things going on with the school in general basically just to help you, to look out for you, and whatnot so it's a very helpful environment. You just have to take advantage of your opportunities."

Edwin commented on the tutors and computers in the Academic Center.

> I like A120 the best because if you're struggling it keeps you on track and get the help you need. Tutors help with computers and services keep you grounded. I also like my Brothers group because they keeps [*sic*] the African American males together with tutoring.

Many of the participants emphasized that the academic center was so much more than just a tutoring center. They noted that the faculty and staff displayed a genuine concern for students; they felt comfortable talking with them. By creating a welcoming environment, the academic center was readily used and recommended by the participants.

Peter summed up the Academic Center this way:

> One specific place I like going to is A120, the Academic Center, and we have some phenomenal people that's in there that help you out, keep you motivated, keep you driven, keep you going, and with that type of support you have in your corner, there's no limit to what you can do. That's why I always push myself each and every day.

In order to serve students who had various responsibilities, a few of the participants suggested more online support advising and tutoring. Evan suggested a late shift in the tutoring center.

> I think that there should be, like, an afternoon team as well, like, a very late afternoon team as well as a morning and afternoon team. Because you've got Ms. J. that's there from, like, either 9 in the morning 'til 6 o'clock in the afternoon, why not have someone from 6 o'clock in the afternoon and probably 9 o'clock at night.

Several participants encouraged more program pathways with mixed modalities such as online and hybrid courses. The study participants talked about needing more flexibility and a simplified pathway for courses being offered to guide students with fewer choices.

Casey, Ben, and Warren complained of too many cancelled classes and said they wanted courses offered in sequential semesters to ease timely transfer or program completion. Casey said, "it's tough…. sometimes you register for your classes and think you're supposed to go into those classes until the last week, and then they drop the classes that you need to graduate."

Academic Challenges

The participants seemed very aware of services and felt comfortable accessing them. The bigger challenges as described by the participants were learning how to manage time, prioritize assignments, and juggle life and study time. This theme looked at the academic challenges and successes participants faced in their college experiences.

Michael described his biggest academic challenge. "I would say time management. Yeah, I'll start like ... like, in the beginning of the year I be [*sic*] going, like, fulltime. My work comes first, but once I find out I got a good grade I kinda [*sic*], like, slack off a little bit." This sentiment was echoed by Aldon, Drake and several others, placing time management on top of a list that included trying to find balance with work, family responsibilities, friends, and a social life while staying on top of all the classwork. Many of the participants spoke of being overwhelmed by it all: just the pace of college, the amount of school work and striving to complete assignments on time.

Simon described how he tried to find balance with his life, work, and school:

> Definitely [the biggest challenge] has been the working and going to school. You just have to take every particular problem that your life might encompass and move on with it. I don't get as much time as I'd like to … to study; however, it's taught me the importance of time management that I can't spend my time or breaks or fooling around. I need to stay focused and I spoke about this prior, the

> need for being responsible and take care of your priorities and making sure everything is in order.

Evan spoke of the need to work but realized it was damaging his ability to succeed in his classes:

> Personally, I work to keep money in my pocket, I also get benefits from the government. And lately when my mother came to town, she told me that "[Evan], you might have to get a real job, because your benefits might be getting cut off." … that might affect school because I might spend more time working than going to school … I just want school to remain my number one priority, because last semester, I did so badly, I could barely stay up in class …. yeah tired. 'cause [*sic*] I do overnight stocking, basically it's my job to unload the truck, 48 feet long, in two hours. Then after that I have to go through as many boxes as possible, then after that I have to clean up the dock before I leave.

Some of the participants, such as Aldon, Nick, and Frank, who were in the learning community said it helped them stay on track with assignments, learning study skills, offering encouragement to each other through support from the Brothers. They also spoke about wanting and needing more interaction with an individual mentor who understood about their program, cultural challenges, and what it takes to reach their academic goals.

Tyson expressed the essence of the participants' responses about being in the Achievers Learning Community when asked to suggest anything that could be done differently or added to support more graduation and program completion success for the male African American students. He summed it up in this manner.

> I don't think so [need to change or add more], not off the top of my head. I'm pretty sure if I thought about it, I will come up with a couple of them. Yes. I feel that The Achievers has really been beneficial, and it's really just a strong environment. It really is, honestly.

Lester talked about having to change jobs in order to get off of the night shift:

> A challenge for me, for example, when I used to work for Plastic Cup, I worked night shift and I have [*sic*] to come to school in the morning. Can you tell every

> time I did, I was just sleeping during class … night shift and then have classes at nine … and here also there's a lot of homework that we have to do.

Frank talked about trying to find balance:

> Balancing schoolwork versus just friends, hanging out with friends. They like to party and I don't like the club. It's been school versus family, school versus partying, hanging out with them and, you know, creating a bond. Basically like a second family. Finding that balance, hanging out with them makes me happy. When I was with [still in] the Achievers, if I wasn't with them studying, it was just me and my dog and I would just study.

Aldon described his frustration with the amount of homework and assignments while dealing with a broken leg:

> My biggest challenge was the whole bunch of work being piled up … at once. And at the beginning of the semester I had a broken leg and I had to get around the school with crutches, and it was hard just to actually want to get up and go … and I was on crutches for about 7-8 months.

Blake talked about being overwhelmed with the whole idea of trying to keeping up with it all:

> Keeping up with the academics, just staying on top, just making sure you turn in your work assignments on time, and make sure they're not last-minute, that they're exceptional, you know, if you turn it in you're bound to get a good grade and whatnot.

Academic Successes

The data reports confirmed the academic success of the participants who were members of the Achievers Learning Community. According to the Midwest College Achievers reports (IAR, 2015) the cohorts' course retention rates, fall-to-fall persistence rates, and mean term grade-point averages were better than the non-Achievers African American male students. The reports provided the data indicating in 2012, 66.7% of the Achievers persisted fall to fall compared to 22.8% of the non-Achievers African American males. By 2014, this improved to 75% of the Achievers persisting fall to fall, compared to 29% of the non-Achievers students.

Another academic challenge for many African American students has been the ability to complete developmental course sequences. The Achievers learning community consists of students who placed into developmental English and reading. The cohort pass rate for these courses in 2011, 2012 and 2013 were higher than the general African American student population. This information is based on a Midwest Institutional Accountability and Research report generated for the Achievers (IAR, 2014). The Achievers' academic reports indicated better cumulative grade-point averages, persistence, and movement from developmental courses to college level than their peers who did not participate in the Achievers and the Brothers. The findings in this study support the literature, (Harper, 2005, 2006; Harper & Quaye, 2007), as the participants involved in the students' organizations and learning community reported positive perceptions of their academic and social integration at the two-year college.

Another challenge G. discussed with me, and documented in the end-of-year focus group reports, was the students wanted to remain with their initial cohort faculty and were having difficulty engaging and building relationships with their faculty in other courses. The initial faculty teaching the cohort were hand-picked to work with the program. It was determined that the reluctance to approach faculty and establish relationships could be addressed in the cohorts' section of the FYE college success course. This additional college success topic helped the students in the next two cohorts build their confidence in approaching instructors and remedied the communication and relationship issues with non-cohort faculty.

The students became more confident in their ability to be successful and demonstrated this with improved course retention and semester grade-point averages. Steven talked about how he improved his abilities by attending college: "… So I gained a lot of experience throughout the

years as I gradually improved myself and improving my ability to learn what I could learn … it was through self [motivation to succeed] and motivation of self."

Aldon responded to a question about whether he felt he had more time management skills and had become more organized and better able to handle the pressure of the amount of college work.

> Yes, 'cause I feel like I got tired of like having to rush a deadline and get things done so I have learned to do it step by step, like pace myself; I don't have to knock out the whole thing in one day, I can do it as time [something], because the assignments are not assigned, like, the day before, I do have time to do it.

Several of the participants finishing their degrees commented about their mistakes along the way and their need to take ownership of their opportunity to change their outcomes. Warren was a graphic design student who was graduating at the end of the semester. He acknowledged that it took failing as he began college for him to see how much he wanted to succeed. Warren explained how he felt he had changed:

> My college experience has changed me as a person by making me a little bit more responsible. When I messed up my freshman year, it was one of the worst feelings of my life. … Here, it's made me more responsible because of me failing my freshman year, and a little bit … older and wiser … I've been able to just really focus on my schoolwork and take it seriously as it should've been with my freshman year … but I rarely see people change their majors because they fail at it. It has really helped me understand and be able to focus and harness it, and really enjoy it.

Harry talked about getting students involved and helping them so they can academically excel and not lose their financial aid:

> Yep, and those students who aren't getting good grades, we need to go and get them involved so we can help them because they don't understand that they're wasting money.
>
> I'm a perfect example of that. I messed up and that's why I'm paying for my classes now. After this semester, I should be getting it back. Last term I had a

> 3.3 G.P.A. and grades are looking good now … Sometimes, you have to lose to win … Yeah, to understand the importance of it. I had to go through that, but I don't want others to have to go through that.

The participants in this study, whether in the Brothers or the learning community, voiced their willingness to accept help from friendly, even intrusive support for their academic challenges. They were willing to accept advice and guidance from those faculty, staff, and fellow students who were ready to assist them in seeking the appropriate support and asking the questions that they weren't sure how to ask.

Personal Challenges

In this section, participants will describe the type of personal challenges and successes they have encountered while in college. This is a discussion of what barriers participants encountered and how they coped with them and what and who supported them in overcoming the challenges. Did they perceive their institution as understanding their challenges and supporting them in overcoming the barriers? What did the participants view as their successes while attending college?

Nick talked about his personal challenges focusing on trying to not stress about job and finances:

> I wouldn't say academically would be a challenge for me, I'm probably thinking like personal because just outside because people don't realize how much it is, like how much the sacrifice is outside of school, as far as bills, you know, and paying on your car, or whatever you have to face outside of school. So I would say those are the biggest things, not staying on track, just putting all those things together. The pressure of the bills and all that other stuff, like trying to get a job, trying to find a job.

Quentin spoke of his first-semester challenges:

> Probably homesickness, I didn't get to go home at all the first semester. So being out here by myself for the first time, it could be … it's an experience, but I got through it, and you got to just rely on knowing that you still have the support, you know, just a phone call away, so that'd be one of them. Self-motivation is another one, you always got to keep yourself motivated and have others around you that motivate you and you can in turn motivate them to do work too.

Casey voiced his need to manage his time carefully due to all of his responsibilities:

> Because when working two jobs and then taking care of a mother that has been on dialysis ten hours every night, it is kind of hard for you to do one thing you want to do, and then knowing you have responsibilities … you have to get those responsibilities before you can have a personal life. So I manage my time in coming to school, if I got an extra thirty minutes I'll pull out a book, or do a little bit of homework here and there, or when I'm on my break I try to do homework there, or whenever I can.

Some of the other participants talked about their personal challenges. Several participants suggested more help was needed with the financial obligations. Nick was one of those who talked about help with financial obligation. He suggested scholarships and tuition discounts as incentives for the Achieves and Brothers as part of their programs. "Yeah, he said programs are alright but to add to programs, why couldn't we have, like, why couldn't they push us to get, like, different tiny little scholarships?"

Many of the non-traditional-aged participants were faced with working long hours, such as Nelson, who said, "I work 40 hours a week, yes the night shift and come straight to classes … I might get 4-5 hours of sleep." Students such as Nelson, Casey, and Lester were trying to catch a little sleep, take care of family obligations or go straight from a night shift to classes**.**

Nelson, a family man who worked full-time, talked about work, studying, and sleep:

> You know, we have some problem[s]. We have kids. So when I'm going [off] campus, I am going to my home so at home I can review my homework, you know? If I have exam or quiz I can go to library because, you know, at home you have noise. My kid makes up noises so you can get no study easily. So if I have a

> quiz or exam I'm going to library. So I think, you know, I'm working at night so I come from, I come from job … So I must sleep some hour, just five hours. Not a lot.

Harry described his biggest challenges in the past few years:

> My biggest challenge has to be me, okay, let me see about this. I've had a lot of deaths in the family and friends passing away. I lost up to eight friends over the past four years … I stay in the suburbs and it's [the violence] gotten closer. You know, round the corner from my own house my friend was shot and killed …. She's supporting two other girls in college and on top of that she has a 30-year-old still living at the house with a son. So my mom has a lot of stress on her already, so I don't want to put more stress on her by saying I need my rent paid 'cause I didn't get much hours on my job this month. It's just a lot of stuff so a lot of responsibility.

Frank explained why he found it hard to have male friends:

> Just because of my experiences with males, like growing up I met all types of characters; they say one thing but when you get to the place or whether it's a whole different story. It's another story or they're just not reliable. They try to take advantage of you. Like the people I talked about when the friends I did have that always, when I talked about being isolated. I had to cut them off because of that [not trusting], it's so hard to get a group of friends.

Evan talked about escaping a rough neighborhood to better himself through education:

Yep. My background, like, I always grew up like moving from apartment to apartment living in rough neighborhoods. It's just that I didn't like the neighborhoods I lived in. So I wanted to escape from that terrible environment and go to something that's a little more structured, a little bit less expensive, and people that don't fight over a ridiculous thing like a $200 pair of shoes.

Harry went on to describe the challenges faced by minority students in general:

> I feel that since this is a predominately White area, we need to get in touch with our African American students, not just the males but the females as well. We need to get more in tune with who we are and who they are and how we can keep them motivated. I just don't feel like we have enough meetings and groups with organizations having activities to attract the students. We need to do more of that for African American students.

Personal Successes

Kevin was graduating from Midwest at the end of the semester. Twenty years earlier, while living in Chicago, he had attended college, but says he wasn't focused so he quit. Now at sixty-one years old he was finishing his degree.

> … I'm sixty-one years old right now. A lot of discoveries have been made since I developed my world view. I want to find out what's going on and being educated is the primary thing. There were specific things I wanted to know; mainly [I'm] interested in evolution and biology … the reason to go to college was to learn to use my mind better to learn how to think … I wanted to have more personal power. Having that personal power at my discretion then I could apply it to things I was interested in … wanted to impact besides being a better family man and friend.

The rigors of classes, assignments, papers, and exams can take a toll on students' confidence and determination. The participants discussed the many challenges and how their supporters both on campus and in their families helped them stay focused. Students face many challenges while attempting to get an education and often get strength from their desire to please their family.

Harry spoke of his mother, who wanted him to be successful, and the decision to attend college after his father's death.

> Yes, I'm the baby and I have to hold my father's name in high account. I have to stay on top of everything. … Mom … She's always there to help me down the right pathway. She's always there whenever I need her. She's a big college person and she went to school and all that stuff. She really wants me to get the work done and be successful. My dad … he passed away 5 years ago; he didn't go to college. He went to high school and graduated with a high school diploma. He always told me that college was the way to go.
>
> Yeah, he talked it up. He's pretty much the reason I'm in school right now. Yeah, it's my parents. I just want to make it right for them and be proud of me.

Nick described how he felt successful and humbled by his new maturity:

> I would say as far as it changed me, just maturing, that's about it. I would say that it was humbling as well, just showing you how being an adult really is, 'cause you know, like you said, it is different from high school and it is different in college, and you're more independent when you go to college. I showed my mother that I can do college, by the grades that I give her, so I mean that's a good thing, as well.

The participants faced many barriers, life challenges, and distractions while attempting to complete their educational goals. The general consensus was that some of the programs and supports made a difference, but too often "life" was getting in the way of focusing on school.

Some of the study participants **s**hared how they had matured during their first year of college.

Frank explained why he chose the Achievers over his old friends:

> Balancing schoolwork versus just friends, hanging out with friends. They like to party and I don't like the club. It's been school versus family, school versus partying, hanging out with them [the Achievers/Brothers] and, you know, creating a bond, basically like a second family. Finding that balance, hanging out with them makes me happy.

Quentin commented on how he changed:

> I would have to say I'm more mature, because I have an idea of what it's like to be by yourself, living on your own. Actually, I saw my grandmother the other day; she said that she could see the maturity of me just over the past year how I don't walk with my head down anymore and how I just pay attention to more stuff … I matured more while being in college … I'd have to say more serious. My father and mother have seen definite change in how I take care of things. Yeah, I'd have to say that.

Peter spoke of how good it felt to have people comment on his more adult demeanor:

> … before I first came here I was like the real goofy type, funny, the funny guy everyone wants to be around 'cause I'm just so happy to be around. And coming back from then 'til now, going back home, people started seeing a lot of changes in me. They started seeing how I carry myself: appearance is everything, 'cause I say that the first appearance somebody's going to judge you off of, and it has to be a good appearance, it has to be. So just me, how to articulate conversation

> more, how to stay confident when I'm speaking, eye contact is everything. My mentor, A, has really has changed me as a person, and going back home, it was a real shock to people to see, like who is this person, like, where did you come from? So it really felt so great just to see the look on people's faces, say, "Oh, you really have become a man at this time, you really have bettered yourself."

The older students with families stressed how they often needed to go to the library or remain on campus late to study due to noise and distractions at home. These participants said they missed their children's sporting events, recitals, and plays but realized they were making sacrifices in order to provide better lives for their families.

Nelson talked about getting his education while working full-time in a warehouse:

> I think the first challenge in my life is to finish my classes, my schooling, you know? To become, you know, the family as … father … chief of house. You know, so my kids just grow up so now, you know, I must decide to give them example, because I don't like to see my kids work like me.

Edwin summed up the discussion on personal challenges and success:

> This gives me a great opportunity to motivate my family. My story doesn't end at Midwest. I can look back and say I've done a lot of things and Midwest has been my greatest achievement so far.

Inspiration: Personal, Family, and Colleagues

Many of the students who walk through the doors of a community college are academically underprepared, financially strapped, and lack a basic understanding of the processes to begin and succeed in college. This theme looks at who or what motivates a student to decide on attending a community college. What friends, family members, or colleagues inspired them to choose post-secondary education? The students described facing their doubters, wanting to excel in life, making their parents and family proud, or preparing themselves to support a family.

Nick described himself as one of those students who had not prepared himself for college but used people's doubts about his ability to go to college as his motivation to prove them wrong.

> My motivation, I would have to say the doubters, I would say like teachers that said I couldn't do … thought I wouldn't even go to college when I was in high school. You know, because I didn't get off to a good start in school so I felt like this was just like a rebound so I can get back on the right path.

Jeffrey talked about advice his mother gave him that inspired him to go to college:

> By us being Black. A lot of Black people don't attend college or finish college; my momma always told me that. You already got two/too (something) against you in this world: that you're Black and you're a male, and not too many finish college, so yeah, that kind of motivated me to keep going.

A large number of African American males enter community college with family encouragement, love, and prayers but little financial support or cultural capital to assist them in navigating the college-going experience. The participants' families varied in levels of education, with some participants not wanting to disappoint a family that had past college completers, while others were the first in their family to attend college.

David said he wanted to follow in his mother's academic footsteps:

> My mother motivated me … She graduated with her associate's and went back and got her bachelor's … her nursing degree … If I can see my mom do it … then there really is no limit to what you can learn. She did it at 40 and went back to school and learned more than she never even did go to school for. So if my mom can do it so can I. It's just great to see somebody else in my family doing it because it makes it a little easier.

Tyson discussed his disappointing past attempts at trying to enroll in college and whose staunch belief and financial support would get him in that he would get into college:

> The biggest motivation this year would have to be my grandmother. She recently passed away last semester; her true dream was just to get me in college. She just wanted me to get in college. She knew, I had little bumps in the road in the past, trying to enroll in college, just something always went wrong. Whether it was

> financial aid, or looking for housing, it was just something that always went wrong. So when I came here, it, everything was right. She knew that if I could just get in I would be able to do the work and stay on top of my work. She was the biggest motivator for me.

Steven talked about being inspired by his family's belief in getting educated:

> Well, my family first and foremost. I come from a very strong, educated foundation. My family is real big on school and education, and I have an older sister and siblings who have just set the groundwork, so it pretty much puts the pressure on me, I'm one of the younger people. My sister, she's a P.A., a physician's assistant. I have another brother who owns his own little brick-building company… I have two teachers in my family.

Steven, was part of a guaranteed admission program to a four-year university. He explained why he chose to attend a community college:

> My family is big on education … Really, I came to community college just to, 'cause I knew my parents were paying for it … I was trying to help, you know, save them more money than I would be, going straight to a 4-year community college, I mean a 4-year university. 'Cause even with the [special admissions program] dealing with the housing, [stutter] housing there is just $10,000 per semester alone just for housing. And to imagine going there with the tuition too, that would be a lot of money coming straight out of my parents' pocket … they've provided for me 18 years of my life, so I'm glad that I got the chance to still go on to higher education but I'm glad that I didn't cost them as much money as I would have going straight to a 4-year … this was … A better value, yes. Then I can still get a good education with my general education classes here and then move on to my specific study classes at the 4-year university.

Other participants shared their thoughts on wanting a better life for themselves, and their present or future families. Both Frank and Quentin referred to staying motivated because of their future families. Frank spoke of his future family as the reason he needed to succeed. "I'm basing everything on the family I always wanted. I see myself having a wife and kids. I'm trying to prepare myself for them."

Quentin kept himself motivated thinking about supporting his family:

> I would have to say the thought of the future really. 'Cause I want to be a father one day, and I always think about how I would support a family, wife and kids, and just keep thinking to myself "this is what I need to do" in order to get that done.

Kevin reflected on his decision and then who inspired him:

> ... If I could acquire knowledge I could better conduct my life … Now the support for going came primarily from my girlfriend and my mother, who's still alive, thank God, she's 92.She supported me wholeheartedly and one of my siblings; I have four siblings now. The others were like, you're an old guy and why are you doing all of this work studying and stuff now? We'd have discussions why it makes sense or not. I didn't really get much support and even among friends and acquaintances it would vary.

Desires to improve their own circumstances motivated many of the students. However, many of them indicated desires to improve their family circumstances and make their families proud fueled their academic endeavors.

Mentors–On and Off Campus

This theme focuses on whom the participants turned to for support both on and off the Midwest campus. Who did they trust to be their guide, a supportive listener when needed and a voice of reason when they felt despair?

Calvin said he could always count on the couple that worked in the academic center. He considered Mr. T. a father figure.

> Mr. and Mrs. T. are so helpful in A120. I really like to talk to him, Mr. T. I went to Career Services and they're real helpful. I go see Mr. T. any time and we talk about a lot of things. It might not even be academic. I don't know, I kinda [*sic*] feel a personal connection to him. He's always willing to sit down to discuss ideas and encourage students. I see him, Mr. T., as a father figure to lots of students. He's very easy to talk to and will listen to you. All the teachers here give a down-to-earth, comfortable vibe so I don't feel any intimidation going to talk to a teacher if something concerns me.

Blake felt his uncle inspired him and helped to keep him motivated:

> My mentor would probably be my uncle. He basically helped me through the whole experience, getting here, and the way he motivates me, because not that he may not know it, but I feel like if you took time out of your life to make sure that I can get this far, the least I can do is bring back good grades and show you some kind of, that all your hard work wasn't for no reason.

Tyson enumerated his list of mentors on and off the campus:

> On campus, I would have to say, it's honestly been my friends. In college, I created, like, a circle of small friends and, you know, we get our work done together, and I feel like if it wasn't for them and their motivation to keep me going and my motivation to help others, then it would be a lot different. Off campus, I would say my boss. He just teaches me, like, it's always important to be on time, and organization skills. It's the other skills that comes from working that helps me with school. Which is time management, which is a key asset to completing college.

Casey talked about his lifelong relationship with his coach and mentor:

> My mentor, he was my freshman basketball coach [in high school.] When I was going through … he was there for me. He understood what I was going through, and he didn't stay away from me because I was just another young Black man going through something in life. Because my coach is Caucasian, so when certain people look at our situation, they could ask me why you so close to him? I can go talk to him about anything.

Simon felt that his instructors were his main on campus mentors because of their offers of assistance:

> I would like to say each and every instructor … at Midwest College have [*sic*] stood as mentors because of how much communication … has been given. You know, how we're able to form that bond for every semester because they take the time out of the day to say, hey, if you have any questions please don't hesitate to ask me. Off campus, my mentors are university graduate students.

Quentin spoke of his Chemistry professor urging him to work harder.

> One mentor on-campus would have to be my chemistry teacher, Mrs. C. She really pushed me to strive to want to do more work in class and out of class, and you know, just tells me examples of how it would help me in life.

David discussed his support from the Brothers, Great Thinkers, and his brother:

> My mentor on campus would be my brothers, as in Mr. D and the brothers introduced to me through the Brothers program. I was also … in the Great Thinkers project that's on campus. I also have a brother named T. and he helped me a lot … since I helped him. He was getting his GED when I first started college he wanted to get his GED and we started college together … since then he's always had my back. He made sure I was in the right position to go to the right road.

Some participants felt they identified with their mentors. Frank saw his mentors as his role models:

> My mentors through The Achievers (TA) and The Brothers, they're teaching me and showing me how to better myself. They're teaching me to be a better man by their example in how they have accomplished or are still trying how to accomplish the things they want to do in life. Just them showing me by example makes me feel comfortable that I can do the same.

Many of the participants who were part of the Achievers talked about their desire for more cohort time and more mentoring. One of the focus group Achievers described his reliance on his cohort. "I rely on this group. They help me challenge my thoughts and their thoughts. The group interaction helps me, you know, see multiple perspectives**."** Several of the focus group members talked about the need for mentors. "I think having a mentor is a good thing. Mentors should be honest with the mentee. This is not high school, so to effectively mentor a mentee, it's real important that they be honest and vice versa." Another Achiever commented that, "It would be a good idea to allow us to help [peer] mentor the incoming freshmen." The final comment from one of the focus group defined what it meant to mentor, "There is a huge difference between a mentor and a baby sitter. A mentor will allow a person to reflect on their experiences and grow from it."

Tyson suggested a plan for mentoring. “I’d say if they’re going to assign mentors, then everybody needs one. Not two or three people, everybody.”

Calvin, who was a student government leader, expressed great interest in a new campus project to provide peer mentors to any incoming freshman who wanted a mentor:

> Right now, I’m really interested in the mentoring program that we’ve got being developed here with the Ideas plan. I feel that a mentor is a really key aspect of helping people and keeping the retention rate going in right direction. Mentors gives people a guidance plan that a lot of people need or give people the one thing they need to push them to the next level. It’s great to have someone there before they give up or having someone who understands because they’ve been where a new student is at. You know, just to have people who can push people along I think, you know, a mentorship would be great and pushing the minority students, who I think need it the most to get them where they want to be. Mentors help show students what it takes to be successful.

The study participants repeatedly talked about the need to have mentors to work individually with students as a way to keep a student motivated and connected. Some participants were adamant about wanting to give back and mentor the incoming Achievers cohort. Other participants said they didn’t mind having a peer mentor or being a peer mentor. The Brothers appreciated the group mentoring they received from the undergraduate fraternity members, from local Rotary members, and from the university graduate students.

As I listened to their experiences, I began to understand why they strongly urged having mentors to support the newer students. While the on-campus organizations and activities were promoted so that most students were aware of their existence, there were some who could not take advantage of the engagement opportunities due to their work schedules or family obligations. The individualized attention of a peer mentor relationship based on mutually agreed-

upon methods of communication and support sessions could greatly benefit students who could not fit structured group meetings into their already hectic schedules.

Summary Statement

This chapter focused on providing information about the three main groups the majority of participants were involved in: The Achievers, the Brothers, and the Great Thinkers. The eight themes that emerged from the research study were discussed using the participants' own words. In the next chapter, a discussion of the findings will focus on answering the research questions and how they relate to the literature.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARIES, CONCLUSIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This chapter provides an overview of the study, a discussion of the research questions, findings and the literature, limitations of the study, implications, and future research. The study was designed to learn more about African American male community college students' perceptions of their campus environment and provide insights into their college-going experiences. The study also examined what academic and student engagement supports were offered by the institution and what students perceived as working or missing from these offerings.

The study was undertaken based on a desire to better understand what factors impact African American male academic and social engagement. The participants' discussion about their academic and personal challenges was vital to understanding what factors impacted their level of engagement in classes and with their campus. These personal stories provided insights regarding students' perceptions of interactions within the institutional environment and why some of them were successful in being engaged with campus activities and organizations.

The themes which emerged from the study provide a better understanding of the African American male community college students' perceptions of their experiences at Midwest College. The themes examined the institutional environment and its impact on their academic and student engagement, the students' personal challenges and motivation to succeed, and

support systems both on- and off-campus that bolster their ability to succeed. For the 27 African American men who participated in the study, their positive community college experiences were a major component in advancing towards their careers or transitioning to a four-year university.

Overview of the Study

College enrollment rates have increased over the last 30 years. African Americans now make up 12 percent of the national college enrollment. Despite this encouraging news, one group, African American males, remains further behind all other demographics in college enrollment and completion (NCES, 2005). When African American males do enroll in college, they are most likely beginning post-secondary education at community colleges (AACC, 2015; Flowers, 2006).

While African American males are enrolling in community colleges, however, the women outnumber their same-race male counterparts 2 to 1 (Cuyjet, 2006). In 2009, it was reported that African American females earned 68 percent of all associate's degrees and 66 percent of all bachelor's degrees (NCES, 2010). In sharp contrast, African American men earned 32 percent of all associate's degrees and 34 percent of all bachelor's degrees (NCES, 2010). Current literature has documented the downward spiral of African American males in four-year institutions; however, less is known about the reasons behind these students' disengagement and lower degree completion at the community colleges. African American males at community colleges continue to have lower certificate and degree completion rates than any other student group (NCES 2010).

The literature base was heavily focused on quantitative research which addressed institutional retention (Bush, 2004; Glenn, 2001) or focused on cognitive comparisons of African American and White male students (Flowers, 2006; Redman-Mingo, 2010). These studies provided statistical data about the academic and social engagement challenges encountered by male African American students without providing information regarding the quality of the college experiences and the reasons behind the challenges. Flowers (2006), Harper (2005), and Harper and Tuckman (2006) concur that the literature has not adequately explored community college attendance of African American men.

They suggest seeking African American males' insights into their perceptions of their campus and the quality of these experiences. They suggest finding out what and who supports the students' success or hinders it and what is missing. McClenney and Marti (2006) agree that the student engagement research was the biggest gap in literature on community college students.

The purpose of this study is to better understand African American male community college students' perceptions of their academic and social experiences at a community college. Student involvement has been found to be an important indicator to student success (Astin, 1984; Kuh 2003; Tinto, 2002). The significance of this study is the narratives in the students' own words, as African American males describe what they perceive affects their ability and desire to persist at community colleges and what can be done to enhance their feelings of belonging. This study would contribute to the relevant literature by giving voice to the students' perceptions of their experiences and what factors they view as affecting their academic and social engagement based in a theoretical perspective. This information could assist in the design of programs to support and retain African American male community college students.

The research literature review in Chapter 2 provided an overview of the theoretical and conceptual framework for this study, as well as the rationale for its use in this study. The review summarized the theories of both Astin (1984) and Tinto (1993). Additionally, the model of racial centrality (Chavous et al., 2003; Wong et al., 2003) and the model of student engagement (Kuh & Love, 2000), along with a variety of encouragement models, were discussed.

In addition, a brief examination of the changing social norms, which affected African American male students, was included in order to provide a cultural context. Second, an examination of the sociological and cultural barriers that African American males have encountered over the last 20 years and how these may create barriers to their success is included.

The literature review included a brief review of how family support and encouragement affects African American students' engagement and persistence and an overview of studies conducted about African American students at various types of colleges. Finally, relevant studies about African American males' academic and social engagement at community colleges were reviewed and critiqued to provide a context for this study.

A basic qualitative research study gave voice to the students' academic and social experiences and their meaning of these experiences. The research design section examined the methodology and procedures used to study the academic and social perceptions of male African American students attending Midwest community college. The study was based on the researcher's interest in examining students' perceptions of their community college experiences and perceptions of the college campus and the institution's effect on their experiences.

A sample of 27 males who self-identified as African American were recruited to participate in the qualitative study at Midwest College and talk about their perceptions of their

community college experiences in semi-structured interviews. A description of the sample and site selection criteria included an explanation of procedural changes. Besides interviews, the types of general data collected were described, including , college satisfaction survey reports, web sites, and learning community focus group reports; the review and analysis of this information was discussed. The description of the data analysis procedures outlined the coding processes used to analyze the interviews. The analysis resulted in the categories used to form the six themes which emerged from the study interviews. A brief outline of the eight themes which emerged from the data analysis was provided.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the male African American community college students' perceptions of their campus environment?
2. What have been their challenges and successes at community college?
3. What academic and student development support is offered by their institution?
4. Who are the mentors available for African American males?

The data analysis yielded major themes based on the four research questions. These themes were discussed in Chapter 4. The participants' own words gave meaning and understanding to many of their actions, concerns, and desires for support in their college-going endeavors. This study gave voice to African American male students who have been documented as having the lowest persistence and completion rates at community colleges and universities.

The findings indicated the men possessed an overall positive perception of their campus environment while making sound recommendations to further enhance it. They discussed the

benefits of good faculty interactions in creating a welcoming and comfortable environment and feeling supported by the faculty. Many of the students talked about how important they considered the information faculty shared with them about classwork, navigating college or life. The words most often used to describe engaging faculty were "passionate" and "energized." Edwin captured the essence of several of the participants' experiences when he enthusiastically described his faculty mentors, "We need more teachers like Ms. H. She is there to walk you through it and helps and guides you to what she expects from you and keeps you motivated. If you have problems, you can trust her."

The results indicated many of the participants gained academic efficacy through easily accessible academic support services and an African American male learning community. The intentional supports offered by the faculty, advisors, and mentors in the learning community's social group helped the cohorts adapt to the rigors of college**.** This group bond helped create a stronger sense of both racial centrality and self-confidence through association with members of their race and gender. Other participants voiced concerns about the multiple stressors of work, family, and juggling a busy academic schedule, emphasizing they wanted more assistance in developing the skills to prioritize and manage multiple responsibilities.

The participants' responses indicated a split between those who actively engaged in clubs and organizations and those who were not engaged due to work and family obligations. Difficulties in accessing clubs and organizations due to work and family schedules led to several of the participants recommending services and organizations meeting sometimes in the evening, on a weekend, or via online chat. They also recommended developing other modalities such as social media and mobile apps and texting to reach busy students and designing activities based

on parenting, relationships, time management, and other relevant topics to increase campus engagement.

Many of the men praised their families for providing encouragement, financial help, guidance and belief in them and support of their academic goals. The majority of men considered their families and friends to be their off-campus mentors. The men spoke of being inspired to make their families proud and some also spoke of encouraging and inspiring family members to start or return to college. The men voiced a strong desire for more mentors and peer mentors on campus to provide individualized support and guidance. Interestingly, the participants shared similar feelings about more diversity hiring to increase African American faculty and staff. The men described this idea of having more people like themselves on campus and in the classroom as pivotal to achieving their academic goals.

It is my hope that this study has provided additional understanding of the challenges these men face and has added to the qualitative literature base on minority males in community colleges.

Discussion and the Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the African American male community colleges students' perceptions of their campus environment?
2. What have been their challenges and successes at community college?
3. What academic and student engagement support is offered by their institution?
4. Who are the mentors available for African American males?

Research Question #1: What are the African American male community college students' perception of their campus environment?

Faculty and Staff

Based on the results, the participants believed the campus to be "safe" for them and felt welcomed and supported by both the faculty and staff. These results were supported by analysis of the interviews, the focus group reports, and the Midwest College's Community College Student Satisfaction (CSSE) report. Glenn (2001) reported better retention of students at colleges where students perceived a friendly campus environment.

Steven talked about his favorite instructor.

> One of my instructors, D.H., he's one of the criminal justice instructors here, you know. He keeps it real, pretty much. He's one of my favorite instructors, he doesn't beat around the bush; he has his ways but he really helps out and he'll tell you all the time, he has hands-on experience so he knows what he's talking about.

Steve continued with additional comments about the faculty engaging students.

> Well, I like the friendly atmosphere that [Midwest] provides, it's a lot of hands-on. Like, you're not just walking the halls and just seeing ghosts, you're actually seeing faculty members, staff, and teachers engaging with the students...teachers just giving you information that they feel would best help you with your college experience while here.
>
> Well, I feel pretty comfortable; I haven't had no queries. Ever since I first step foot on campus I've been inspired, like I got a fire lit under me. I always, I look around, I saw some things, okay, like, hey, you can do this or these things changing. I felt pretty comfortable, like with the staff, students; it's all friendly. I haven't had any negative experiences with any of the staff or faculty and support members here, it's all been on great terms with everyone.

Even though a few participants voiced concerns about some faculty stereotyping or being less than helpful, Casey noted, "Like I said, please don't think every Black kid is a troublemaker," and Michael stated, "They don't take time out to try to help you if they don't like you," The men were able to move past it. The majority of them gave the faculty an overall high

rating for accessibility and support. The study findings of high levels of satisfaction with faculty-to-student interactions, both in class and out of class, align with the literature on this topic. Astin's (1984) Involvement Theory notes that involved students spend more time on campus interacting with faculty and other students. Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement states that the interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other involvement or campus characteristic. The results indicating students' positive experiences with the campus and the faculty support the research of Tinto (1987), who asserts that student departure is the result of what happens after entering an institution more than what transpired prior to entry. My study results support the research of Tinto (1983, 1987) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), who confirm that faculty-student relationships greatly impact students' decisions to persist or leave college in the first year.

While the students gave their campus high marks for a safe and welcome environment, some of them did not feel as safe or welcome in the larger community itself.

Nick commented on the community surrounding Midwest College's campus.

> I'm just not, okay, well, maybe let me go back and just say, like, this is not specifically for Midwest students, like, I'm just not targeting Midwest students, this is just the local area. This is more of, like, we see different like white people, and they just look at us funny like we're gonna [*sic*] do something to 'em [*sic*]. So it's not necessarily Midwest; it's just the community environment.

The themes developed from the interviews confirmed the participants felt that the Midwest College campus was a welcoming and supportive environment. They perceived it provided both academic and social supports and opportunities to encourage students' engagement and commitment to their institution. The institutional factors forming the students' perceptions of the faculty were supported by data from the national community college student

engagement survey (CCSSE) administered at Midwest College (CCSSE, 2012). The report indicated students felt supported by faculty and staff who provided accurate advice and information, levels of expectations, guided support, learning, and involvement—all of which were positive conditions.

The study results indicated the students were comfortable with their faculty interactions and saw the faculty as approachable and concerned with their success. The study findings support Tinto's (1975, 1993) academic literature which posits that students will commit to their institution when they feel it has provided them with dedicated faculty and staff committed to their success. The participants' comments about feeling comfortable on campus and feeling a strong sense of belonging are supported by Hausmann et al. (2007), who consider students' sense of "belonging" an important factor that can affect student retention; these researchers also consider "belonging" a construct which reflects institutional and student fit. Roberts (2009) noted that higher enrollment and persistence levels occurred at schools whose campus climates were described as supportive of all students and inclusive of African American males. He also stated campuses with higher African American male enrollment and persistence tend to have more African American coed and male organizations. The males were also more likely to be involved in general student clubs and organizations because of limited choices. Osiris (2005) noted that institutions should encourage students to study and learn together to draw on the diversity of the campus. She encouraged developing extra-curricular and social events celebrating a campus's diversity.

Classes

Many of the participants spoke positively about the current programs, environment, and ease of connecting with faculty and staff. Simon commented on class size and availability of faculty.

> You know, I like the fact that we have like tutors here on campus and they're always here for us and they support us. And, you know, we have instructors who we can talk to, rather than sitting in seminars where there's like 300 students and the professor hardly sees you unless you go to their office hours, and even still they're very busy individually.

One student, Robert, commented on the improved campus environment compared to when he attended Midwest four years earlier. "It's different than back then, and I mean better, with more things to help us." He explained how he came to be at Midwest: "I came this way because some of my friends were here and at the university. I just wound up living here, and that is where I'm at and now I'm back."

The study participants considered the diverse student body and positive student interactions further proof of a welcoming and inclusive campus climate. They commented on having favorable student interactions both in classes and throughout the campus. Such positive experiences were vital to the participants' academic and social integration, helping to increase their engagement and persistence. These results affirm the research of Strayhorn (2008) and Ward et al. (2012), which says students tend to persist and have a higher level of academic success when they learn to navigate the academic environment, accept the institutional values, and reconcile their personal and social integration: in other words, when they develop a sense of belonging at their institution. Students who have experienced more diverse interactions with students and faculty tend to persist at higher levels at predominately White institutions.

The participants felt the environment was welcoming and supportive; however, many of the participants urged more diverse hiring at the community college to enhance students' ability to work with more people who shared an understanding of their experiences.

Tyson suggested why he thinks more minority faculty could help students:

> I think we should have more [minority] representatives, just because we want people to look at both sides [better understand where I'm coming from]. Sometimes people grew up differently, and they don't really understand. I mean, if you have somebody in your corner that understands like your culture and the way you live, then you won't have to always have to face that person and just understand them. And most of the time that always results in, well I'm right, I'm the teacher. Or you know, you're a student, you're not right instead of, I understand where you're coming from or how can we make this better.

The participants urged more diverse hiring of African American faculty and staff and emphasized it was critical to minority students' ability to attain their academic goals. The male students felt they needed the support and encouragement to help them develop "grit" (passionate long-term commitment to completing a goal) and persist to graduate. These results affirm the research of Glenn (2001), Beckles (2008), Osiris (2005) and Roberts (2009), which states institutional characteristics such as an inclusive environment with student organizations, additional support systems for African American males, and a warm campus climate impact students' persistence, social engagement, academic efficacy, and academic achievement. The men desired more opportunities to be taught by or seek services from African American men who could relate to them and their struggles. Ben stated more Black faculty would help students feel they had someone to relate to them: "Don't make them feel isolated. Make them want to attend here."

Support

The men also discussed their positive comfort level in seeking assistance and asking questions in all areas, including academic departments, student learning support, and student services departments. The results support the literature which states students are more likely to take advantage of various campus resources and engagement opportunities in a welcoming environment with supportive faculty, staff, administrators, and marketing information on the various opportunities available (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Museus, 2008).

Calvin spoke about the ease of connecting with people at Midwest:

> Here at Midwest it's easy to make connections. Feel like I've been able to network and make connections with teachers and others higher than yourself. I feel like that connection really helps guide students along the way and show in this environment that they care for them. I'm not saying that the university doesn't try to connect with students but at the universities it's a little more difficult to develop those relationships because the professors and staff are dealing with a ton of students. That's one thing I really appreciate about Midwest. Also, I say that goes along with the academic advising staff that really tries to get you to the next place where you're trying to go in your life. They work hard at trying to find out what's best for you, where you want to go and just how to get you there.

Peter explained why he felt supported and motivated by the Academic Tutoring Center:

> One specific place I like going to is A120, and we have some phenomenal people that's in there that help you out, keep you motivated, keep you driven, keep you going, and with that type of support you have in your corner, there's no limit to what you can do. That's why I always push myself each and every day.

A shift appeared to be taking place with African American men opening up to peer support and accepting activities beyond the usual macho male code. High-achieving African American students had negotiated a different perception of themselves as being able to get things

done without being perceived as trying to be "White" or "girly," which supports Harper's (2006) findings that students were respected for their involvement.

Frank emphasized the encouragement offered by the Achievers' faculty and how this helped his group stay focused on their studies.

> Yeah, like when we did have all of the classes together sometimes, maybe six of us would go to Dr. F's office or to Mr. K. or R's office … a bunch of us all together to ask some questions about class and then we would just talk about life afterwards. Once we leave from his office and do our own thing and eventually meet up to study and then that's how everybody had good grades.

These shifts in Black masculinities indicated African American men wanted to keep their "cool pose" but were more willing to engage with campus organizations if given some minority male role models and what they perceived as relevant engagement opportunities.

Frank talked about his Achievers' faculty and the staff who led the Brothers showing him how to be a better man.

> They're teaching me and showing me how to better myself. They're teaching me to be a better man by their example in how they have accomplished or are still trying how to accomplish the things they want to do in life. Just them showing me by example makes me feel comfortable that I can do the same.

The study results affirm the research of Harris III et al. (2011) regarding African American males' desire to have intrusive advising and mentoring from faculty, staff, and older African American college students. My study participants, like those inHarris III et al. (2011), wanted support from minority faculty and staff demonstrating appropriate ways to model masculinity while achieving success academically or professionally.

Research Question #2: What have been their challenges and successes at community college?

Time Management

The participants focused many comments on the time management and academic challenges they faced. Tyson, who worked 45 hours a week while attending classes full-time, said, "I try to get my work in between classes, even if it's just 10 minutes." The most often repeated phrase shared when discussing academic challenges was "time management." Many of the men shared similar experiences surrounding this issue. Michael spoke of "losing focus on time management." Simon described the need to make every minute count: "I don't get as much time as I'd like to…to study; however, it's taught me the importance of time management: that I can't spend my time or breaks on fooling around." Dagley et al. (2001) describes the need for students to develop their academic self- concept in order to increase their self-efficacy and ability to apply skills to new situations such prioritizing and managing multiple class assignments and exams to persist in college.

Casey recounted why he was big on time management:

> …when I'm doing something I like to get it done right then and there because I'm big on time management…. Because when working two jobs and then taking care of a mother that has been on dialysis 10 hours every night, it is kind of hard for you to do one thing you want to do, and then knowing you have responsibilities... So I manage my time in coming to school; if I got an extra 30 minutes I'll pull out a book, or do a little bit of homework here and there, or when I'm on my break I try to do homework there, or whenever I can.

They expressed concern with the fast pace of classes along with heavy reading, writing and course assignments constantly on their schedules. They described the "juggling" and "trying to keep up" as another major challenge. For the participants who were working and had family

responsibilities, they expressed the most frustration with their schedules and wanted someone they could reach out to for support without having to fit a meeting or appointment into their already busy lives.

Casey described his frustration in balancing his multiple priorities:

> I try. I mean, I'm not going to sit there and tell you everything is all fine. I mean, like, I tell you, I'm human like everybody else. So I break down, I have those moments where I have homework and then I have to take care of her when I stay up 'til 4 or 5 o'clock in the morning, and it's hard for me, but I don't complain because I count my blessings every day. Right now I have two jobs. I'm a personal assistant for the State which is taking care of my mother, and then I work at the gas station.

These students wanted to better prepare for their futures by attending college but found multiple challenges that added stress to their efforts. These study results are supported by the research enumerating risk factors that negatively impact community college students' completion rates: delayed entry; caring for children, spouse, or parents; little or no financial help; or working full-time (Cokley, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Evan spoke about working and keeping up in his classes:

> I also get benefits from the government. And lately my mother… told me that "[Evan], you might have to get a real job, because your benefits might be getting cut off." And the reason that might affect school [is] because I might spend more time working than going to school…. I just want[school] to remain my number one priority, because last semester, I did so badly, I could barely stay up in class…Yeah, tired. 'Cause I do overnight stocking, basically it's my job to unload the truck, 48 feet long, in two hours. Then after that I have to go through as many boxes as possible, then after that I have to clean up the dock before I go. I have to do all of this before I leave.

Classes

Quentin, who was enrolled in courses both at Midwest and at the four-year university, described moving towards working in study groups:

> I mean, I'm one of the students that would be, like, kind of just trying to get through class and then, you know, you have the students that would be more sociable, try to work together, like start study groups and stuff like that. And I would love to join them, I mean, I've always been the person just to try to do my own work and get by, but the students have been very nice, you know, try to group up and get some work done and that's a good thing too that you can have friends that you can study with and both help each other pass the class…Yes, I've met a couple people in my chemistry class, we've had a couple study sessions to help each other pass, you know, the exams… it's been very helpful.

While some participants were already enrolled in college-level classes, others were starting college academically underprepared. As outlined earlier, the learning community designed for African American males entering Midwest was established to assist and support men starting college with developmental placements. The Achievers participants in this study had come to community college needing remedial coursework in Math, Reading, or English due to being far behind in academic preparation when compared to their White and Hispanic counterparts (Bonner II & Bailey, 2006; Flowers, 2006; Green et al. 2006; Thomas et al., 2003).

Edwin commented on how he was receiving support in his class and daily tutoring support to help him with his math.

> Ms. R. in my math class, she helps me feel comfortable and at ease. Ms. M. is also there to help me with my summaries and critical responses on papers in English. All of them are helpful to me…. biggest challenge – My math because I haven't done it in 15 years. Also, electricity: I have to warm back up to it. I have to have more time and help understanding it. I meet with Mr. B. every day and he explains it where I can understand what I need to do. He takes more time with me and breaks it down with easier ways of doing math.

Due to the additional remedial courses, many of the developmental students must add one or two semesters to their degree or certificate program and often exhaust their financial aid before completing their program (AACC, 2015; Green et al.; Pope, 2006). One of the goals of

the Achievers was to add additional intrusive academic supports to assist these students in finishing the developmental sequences faster.

Family

When asked how they have changed since being in college, many of the participants stated that it had made them a better person, given them a feeling of empowerment, and had given them the confidence that they could "make it." They talked about how family and friends commented about them having better attitudes and better interpersonal and problem-solving skills. Michael said college helped him open up to talking to people. "It changed me as a person cuz [*sic*], like, I wouldn't even say nothin' [*sic*] to you, like, I wouldn't say nothin' to nobody right now as far as this conversation, and like [now] I feel comfortable talking with a lot of other people." One participant, Quentin, noted his grandmother was proud he was now "walking with his head up." This confidence and maturity was described as a personal success by both the traditional-aged and non-traditional-aged participants.

The men recounted their personal challenges and struggles with decisions to go or return to college. Tyson recounted how a year off helped him put school in a better perspective. Research on African American family support (Herndon & Hirt, 2004; Palmer et al., 2011; Sledge, 2012) points to family influences about the value of learning and the importance of a college education. Tyson said, "Taking the time off from school…the whole year I just kept saying to myself, "'If I can get in, I can do it.'" Drake described his feelings about going to college:

> Oh yes, when I started to attend Midwest…something was just telling me that I needed to go to school. I wanted to do more with my life. And my mother, she didn't hardly understand that I really wanted to go but in my heart I really wanted to go to college.

While some of the participants were first-generation students, others came from families ranging from a few to many college-educated family members. Many of the participants' personal successes focused on making their families proud of them by going to college.

Calvin spoke of who inspired him to go to college:

> First, I would say my family definitely, because I'm a first-generation student and that's helped motivate me; I want to do well for my family. Second, I always had a sense of wanting to be the best person I can be so that as I grow I can be a positive influence on people. I've grown up around a lot of positive people and it's propelled me to a point of wanting to be like them.

Quentin spoke of his parents motivating him because of unfinished business and wanting to complete the goal and make them proud:

> I'd have to say my parents. Yeah, they didn't get to finish college so they wanted all the kids to have the opportunity to go to college and I'm very grateful for the type of parents that I have. They've just been motivating me and pushing me to be better and have a better life.

Steven, who earlier described his family as having a strong foundation in education, including several college-educated family members, talked further about the importance of pleasing his family and of making a name for himself:

> My family, we're [a] typical black family you see on TV, like, if you're doing right, when it comes to holidays, it's pretty much you get in a circle it's a grill session on you. Like "What are you doing?" "Doing life." "Why would you do that?" so you know you don't want to be that black sheep, or that person being in the grill session during the holidays.

This study affirms the research of Herndon and Hirt (2004) and Palmer et al. (2011) which found that African American students' level of campus engagement can be influenced by institutional support and family encouragement. The key, according to the literature, was the creation of a friendly, welcoming environment for students and provision of resources and support systems which families could help guide students towards.

Several of the participants had also inspired family members to begin college. Evan explained how he had become a role model.

> My aunt came to me for help with math now that she is coming back to school to start her GED. Everybody, my mom and my sisters, have actually thanked my girlfriend for pointing me to college! They are all happy and proud that I'm going to college. I am the first going to college.

Scholars point to the family helping shape students' views on learning (including first-generation families), about being proud of their heritage and finding strength in their racial identity while becoming more educated (Chavous, 2008; Phinney, 1999; Wong, Eccles, & Sarmeroff, 2003).

Research Question #3: What academic and student engagement support is offered by their institution?

General Support Services

The study participants' responses indicated they were aware of academic and student engagement support resources available at Midwest College. The general consensus was the college provided ample resources and worked to make students aware of services and ease of accessibility. Participants were extremely vocal about the services and friendly support offered in a variety of support departments.

Robert explained his challenge and which departments helped him:

> My personal biggest challenge is that I've been told, like, time and time again that I have, like, attention deficit issues, and so I went and saw the counselor here for that stuff…and yeah, the office of disability stuff. Last semester I was in that for a little bit, and then I kind of just stopped doing it. They were nice enough.

The majority of participants spoke highly of the staff in these areas and many of them named individuals within departments such as counseling and advising, the library, and, especially, the academic services center, where they sought out staff and faculty to help them with school *and* personal situations. David commented, "I talk to Mr. T. or Mrs. B. in A-120 if I

have questions. I know they'll help me." Alan spoke of his program advisor and the counseling center staff: "Mr. K. helps me out when I need to talk about problems in school or in my life... in counseling, D. is good for telling me "how it is." He doesn't send me on any wild goose chases."

Edwin talked about the academic center and people there who were helpful.

> I like A120 the best because if you're struggling it keeps you on track and get the help you need. Tutors help with computers and services keep you grounded. I also like my Brothers group because they keeps [*sic*] the African American males with tutoring. Mr. B. and Mr. T. are there to help you with your secondary experience. They have helped guide me in the right direction.

Several of the study participants commented on feeling supported by their career program advisor, academic advisors, and counselors. They described these individuals as someone they could turn to for advice on academic questions, concerns, or personal problems.

Evan talked about reaching out to the people in the program designed to assist first-generation students.

> I like to talk to Trio… if I got a problem, 'cause I think they'll understand me more than anybody 'cause sometimes people think I overreact over little things, but they look at it as yeah, we get what your problem is.

Peter, a Great Thinkers leader, spoke about who he could turn to for help and advice.

> I would say for [help and advice in] psychology to have this guy, E.P. He taught me how to think and how to elaborate on things by thinking … When I first got here, was this lady, Ms. T. She works in the financial aid office, more so dealing with the G.I. Bill and stuff, and she took me underneath her wing, told me what I need to know about Midwest College, the tours I need, how I need to be successful. And another person was Ms. D. Like I said, she's been my advisor, she told me what classes I need to take, if I need help I can go to A120 or they can help you out. You always have people that will help you out. And Ms. D. has been on me since day 1 and I appreciate that.

The majority of men talked about using the academic center (AC) for studying and tutoring purposes. The services included help in a writing center, computer availability, individual study rooms, and a module course learning area. The men also emphasized that the AC was so much more than just a tutoring center because of the genuine concern for students, as well as the services provided. The faculty and staff of the AC were also the people many of the men identified as who they were comfortable talking with about school or personal problems. Peter summarized his feelings about the academic center:

> One specific place I like going to is A120, and we have some phenomenal people that's in there that help you out, keep you motivated, keep you driven, keep you going, and with that type of support you have in your corner, there's no limit to what you can do. That's why I always push myself each and every day... A120 is where you get to interact with everybody just about, I would say, because you have, not only do you have professors that are in there…you also have students that help out other students as well. And interacting with them, more so with students, you guys, say if you guys are in the same class [inaudible] actually helping you out, you have teamwork that's going right there.

This type of institutional support for a skills center to help increase students' writing, study, and exam skills is considered a best practice for increasing retention and credential completion. These study results affirm Boglum and Kubala's (2000) findings that students who were academically achieving and receiving support felt both academically and socially integrated.

My study's participants noted that the academic center's caring staff and faculty established a safe and welcoming environment while reducing anxiety about seeking academic support.

Quentin described the tutoring center:

> What I like best at Midwest is the academic center, A120. I like it the best because it's an area to meet up with friends and just study for upcoming tests and you have a lot of resources for help.

Several positive comments centered on the general availability of computer labs and the library computers for students' use. Harry noted that he stayed on campus after classes:

> I go to the library to get some extra work that I need to get done so the computers and all that stuff are a big help in getting the work done because my computer is broke so I don't have one right now.

Alan offered:

> I like the opportunity to use the computer labs and get help. I'm 54 years old and needed some help getting better at some of my computer use and people here are always willing [to] help. Just like that lady just now. She [VP of academic services] didn't have to stop to help me when I said I couldn't find my paper on the computer just now, but she helped me out. People here aren't caught up in being important.

The study results show participants easily and actively using the campus resources from the computer labs and library to the Academic Support Center. As described in the narratives, the men felt supported and could seek help from staff for academic or personal issues in various areas such as the Academic Center. These findings support the research which documents that men will not ask for help if they are made to feel weak or unwelcome (Sheau & Sedeleck, 2004) but will more willingly use services and seek help if treated well. By creating a welcoming, open center with friendly people ready to answer questions and offer assistance, the AC was readily used and recommended by the participants.

Campus Student Engagement

In this study, two thirds of the participants were involved in either one or several of the campus academic and/or social engagement activities. This study supports the research of

Herndon and Hirt (2004) and Museus (2008), who found that students are more likely to take advantage of opportunities to be engaged when given a welcoming environment, supportive faculty, staff, and administrators, and information on clubs, organizations, and activities.

Engagement, as described by Kuh (2003), equals the time and effort students put into their studies and other activities and the infrastructure that is in place to assist student learning (Kuh, 2003). Student engagement can be viewed as a two-element concept: what the students do and what the institution does. The participants took advantage of the many people and supports for learning (academic resources and engagement opportunities) provided by the college, which corroborates Kuh and Love's (2000) engagement literature.

It became apparent through the interviews and data analysis that not all who wished to engage with campus activities and organizations were able to accomplish this. The participants described heavy course loads, work, and family responsibilities as barriers to engaging more on campus. These reasons support reported literature on the impact of low-income and first-generation students entering college underprepared with additional barriers. Ethnic or minority first-generation students often begin college with multiple barriers: little or no financial support from their families, possibly delayed entry into college, and outside obligations such as families, multiple part-time jobs or full-time jobs (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These risk factors reduce such students' opportunities to engage with their campus or successfully persist to graduation (Engle and Tinto, 2008). The NCES 2010 data reported more minority students entering college and over 50 percent of them starting at community colleges (AACC, 2015). The entry numbers doubled but African American males' attainment of credentials continues to decline. My study's findings support the literature's conclusions about lack of student engagement. It was simply

impossible for the men in my study to participate or access academic support services because of their life circumstances, whether these consisted of heavy class and work schedules or family obligations.

Brothers, Achievers, and Great Thinkers

In this study, more than half of the participants held membership in one or more of the three organizations: The Achievers, the Brothers, and the Great Thinkers. In discussing student engagement support, many participants focused on the Brothers, while another student engagement opportunity often mentioned was the discussion forum, the Great Thinkers. This student-led group offered the ability to host discussion forums based on selected topics picked from social media, the news, campus activities, student success workshops, and relationship issues.

These student-led forums provided a platform for engaging conversations that involved the entire campus community. The students enjoyed the ability to use critical thinking and reflection while discussing political, social, and cultural issues.

Evan spoke of what he liked best at Midwest:

> You know, what I like the best is that I became a part of this group called Great Thinkers, and I was able to easily socially interact with most peers. Because of that I made a lot more friends, and stuff like that.

Frank spoke about enjoying the opportunity to discuss real-life questions.

> As far as Great Thinkers goes, it's just a great organization to go to that lets you be a free thinker. You express your opinion about a certain subject that been playing in your mind and you get to talk about it freely with others and see how they react to it. See if they have input on it as well. It's like debating in a way but it's just having these philosophical questions and life questions you can entertain.

Peter summed up his thoughts on building leaders:

> Like I said, Great Thinkers is another organization where we try to build leaders of tomorrow, more so create community through conversation. We have discussions every Wednesday, talking about the smallest of things to the most complex of things.

Peter went on to suggest ways to gain the males' attention in order to motivate them before developing leadership skills:

> You have to have something that would excite them, I guess, like, just have a discussion about basketball, kind of, you know, or football, social media, just to get them all together. And then after that first discussion or the second discussion, then you could start really targeting more of what's going on in there. Like, I guess the lack of fathers in the households, or what goes on in different neighborhoods, what made you leave where you was from [*sic*] to come to Midwest College, what motivates you to keep going, you know.

The responses generated about the Brothers also centered on the sense of belonging and being proud of being involved in this group open to all African American males on the Midwest College campus. They spoke of the varied opportunities for discussions, presentations, and group mentoring that focused on majors, careers, résumés, interviewing skills, relationships, and how to be successful in college.

The Achievers created strong cohorts of African American males who drew strength from their dedicated faculty and staff support. Their mandatory membership in the Brothers provided them access to a variety of supporters who were at various stages of their degrees.

Tyson spoke of gaining confidence from his involvement:

> Yes. I feel that The Achievers and the Brothers has really been beneficial, and it's really just a strong environment. It really is, honestly, I feel like they guide you through your first year of college in order for you to spread your wings. I feel like after the first semester, I was able to spread my wings earlier than, you know, they may have wanted me to, but I can't blame them 'cause they gave me that confidence.

The academic and social engagement students received from both the Achievers and Brothers group was considered a positive aspect in their college experience, and many of them felt they benefited from both strong academic and student engagement support. Blake noted, "on campus I would have to say Mr. B and other classmates kept pushing us to stay on task and be successful, make sure our work is done."

These meaningful interactions with faculty, frequent interactions with campus activities, and engaging with student organizations can have a positive impact on the students' academic success and sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2013). The Brothers offered an opportunity for the men to feel connected with their peers and encouraged by the role models who mentored the group. The Brothers provided presentations from academic and student support departments, undergraduate and graduate students from area universities, and local male African American role models from a variety of professional backgrounds.

The study results agree with the findings of Herndon and Hirt (2004) and Museus (2008), who noted that students who become members in sub-cultures such as ethnic and racial student clubs and organizations are more engaged and report greater satisfaction with their college academic and social experiences. Cokley (2007) and Wong et al. (2003) support connectivity with one's ethnic or racial group and taking pride in this shared membership.

Edwin talked about his group connecting him to others:

> I'm from out of town and getting involved helps me get to know other people on campus. I like it all. Any learning experience is greatly needed. I have not had any bad experience since being here. I deprived myself of learning in my early years. I like the Academic Center the best because if you're struggling it keeps you on track and get the help you need. Tutors help with computers and services keep you grounded. I also like my Brothers' group because they keeps [*sic*] the African American males with tutoring. Mr.

> B. and Mr. T. are there to help you with your secondary experience. They have helped guide me in the right direction.

Many of the Achievers commented on having improved time management and study skills after being required to attend mandated study groups and enroll in a cohort section of First Year Experience (FYE) 101, a college success course. All of these structured activities discussed in the study findings are necessary to create "grit" in a student by helping them develop better study skills, enhance time management, and prioritize the work load (Duckworth et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2013).

Many of the traditional college-aged participants said they needed and wanted a guide to help them make the transition from high school to the hectic pace of college work. Several of them suggested using technology to provide support, such as online advising services and texting for updates and time management tips similar to those used in the College Success classes. A number of the participants suggested more faculty, staff, and mentors using texts and group chats for flexible two-way communication systems of support and guidance.

A plethora of comments was about interactions with the Brothers and the Achievers contributing to participants' success in meeting the demands of their schedules both in and out of the classroom. They believed the mentoring, social engagement, and academic support helped them stay on track and keep their focus throughout the semester.

Aldon shared a similar feeling expressed by Nick when he summed up his experiences with both the Achievers and the Brothers:

> I came into the Achievers and the Brothers, just like Nick, and we often talked about how they stayed on us about homework, and pushed us to stay on task and do better, keep good grades, and we had meetings to discuss how our college life was and how we were doing with grades. We even had discussions about, like, history and stuff about African

> Americans. Sometimes we got introduced to what we'd want next semester and things that we would need to know for next semester and things like that.

According to the data reports for the Achievers, the African American males from the 2011 to 2014 Achievers' cohorts had higher fall-to-fall course retention rates, higher persistence rates, and higher mean term grade point averages than African American males in developmental classes who did not participate in the learning community. The men spoke with pride about being a part of the support network of The Brothers mentoring organization. They talked about how their peers, as well as the graduate students and visiting professionals, were good sounding boards for problem solving and helping them stay on track.

The Brothers, the Great Thinkers, and the Achievers found strength in being part of a racially supportive group and associating with other academically focused students. This is supported in Herndon and Hirt's (2004) and Museus's (2004) research regarding membership in sub-cultures such as ethnic and racial student clubs and organizations. Additionally, Phinney (1987) and Wong et al. (2003) support connectivity with one's ethnic or racial group and taking pride in this shared membership. Based on their research, racial pride and connectivity protect minority students from racial discrimination.

Linking academic and social support to ensure college readiness and success are essential to creating better student outcomes. Academic and social policies should go hand in hand with increased expectations for student success because the social support builds the networks, connectedness, and motivation that underpin students' willingness to take advantage of programs like tutoring or a learning community. In other words, the social supports provide the foundation on which students are most likely to benefit from academic support strategies (Savitz-Romer &

Jager-Hyman, 2009). Research by Harper (2006, 2012) and Harris et al. (2011) focused on bringing together students who valued education with successful African American males serving as their role models. They state these role models are central to students developing an appreciation of academic work, seeking help, teamwork outside of sports, and supporting one another, all of which are critical to changing views about Black masculinity.

Research Question #4: "Who are the mentors available for the African American males?"

Mentors are considered motivators, guides, role models, and supporters. In my study, many of the participants spoke of their faculty members, program advisors, counselors, or staff members as someone they considered to be their mentor. Though some of the participants described themselves as African American first-generation college students, some of them spoke of locating male role models among their faculty who shared similar backgrounds and understood their challenges, even if they did not share the same race. Frank talked about his strong bond with one of his White faculty from the Achievers' program. "Mr. R., I look up to him because he is very honest with me and he's big on family. He and I have very similar backgrounds."

Casey said he related well to his mentor despite him not being Black:

> My coach is Caucasian, so when certain people look at our situation, they could ask me why you so close to him? He helped me with financial reasons, like if I needed anything with basketball, he'd help me with that, and that's why I look at him as a mentor; I can go talk to him about anything.

Many of the Achievers participants considered their cohort faculty as their campus mentors. Frank said he counted on his Achievers' faculty when he had a problem or question, "Yeah, Mister K. and Dr. F. along with Mister T., they're real supportive."

Jeffery talked about his mentor pushing him and his friends:

> I want to say on campus, maybe Mr. B., ... he's helped us out a lot. Told you what we need to do and get ourselves together, like we might be slacking, like we might be miss two days, he'd send us a mean text usually, you know. Like, you need to get your stuff together before you leave or you "up out of here" and stuff. Off campus, yeah, I agree, I want to say my friends, how we all sometimes work together. Get things done, yeah.

Herndon and Hirt (2004) state that scarcity in numbers of African American males serving as role models make the role models from organization advisors and peer members become even more important for African American males attending PWIs.

Simon described his off-campus mentors:

> I have a few mentors. They happen to be graduates of the university, one in psychology and the others in, one is in computer engineering and the other is in mechanical engineering. And, you know, I talk to them on a daily basis, as much as I can, depending on my schedule.

High-performing upper classmen, Black Greek fraternity members from the nearby university, student government leaders, as well as professionals served as mentors and peer mentors to the African American males in the Brothers. All of these men were serving as group mentors, being role models and providing guidance to the Brothers organization members, and the findings support the literature of Herndon and Hirt (2004), who advocate use of high achievers to support African American males on campus.

Frank talked about several of his mentors, including one of his African American instructors:

> Mr. K. and me, we're very passionate about Black History and the way people view things in society, you know, how people have the narrow views. They help me because they've shown me in their ways, how to better myself.

> They're teaching me to be a better man by their example in how they have accomplished or are still trying how to accomplish the things they want to do in life. Just them showing me by example makes me feel comfortable that I can do the same.

The biggest challenges for many of the participants was making the transitions from high school to college. The participants who had been part of the learning community were vocal about the need for individual mentors or peer mentors for new cohorts to improve their transition to the college after moving beyond the cohort group. Others echoed the sentiment regarding the need for individual mentorship from students who were achieving success a semester or more into their college studies. The requests for more mentoring are supported by the literature, which indicates that faculty involvement and peer mentors are important in the transition to college and academic support for students, particularly African American males (Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ward et al., 2012). Mentors are also important in serving as role models and guides (Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ward et al., 2012).

While this institutional support system was strongly noted by many of the participants, the biggest off-campus contingent of mentors was listed as family members. Most participants spoke of family, whether parents, grandparents, sisters or brothers, as those who inspired them to attend college and continued to provide motivation, support, and prayers for them.

Steven spoke of his biggest influence:

> My biggest influence has been my grandfather. My grandfather, my mother, pretty much all my siblings, but my grandfather and mother have really been pressed, like "hey," now they see if I go off path, like "hey, you're kind of going off the wayside, let's get back to it." You know, I've been through my struggles in college, it's not my first rodeo, but you know, every time it's always uplifting support, positive, like "hey, you can do it, just work at it, work hard, don't let whatever situation you're going through in life get you down, always have hope, have faith, trust in God."

Harry, a business marketing major and vocalist, described how his mother mentored him while his late father inspired him:

> Off campus, it's my mother. I'm the youngest in a family of four girls.
>
> Yes, I'm the baby and I have to hold my father's name in high account…She's always there to help me down the right pathway. She's always there whenever I need her. She's a big college person and she went to school and all that stuff. She really wants me to get the work done and be successful. My dad, although he passed away five years ago, he didn't go to college…He always told me that college was the way to go.

This type of encouragement and support has a positive impact on minority students' persistence and psychological well-being (Herndon & Moore, 2002; Palmer et al., 2011). Some of the men talked about their spouses or girlfriends as the cheerleaders who inspired and continued to motivate them to stay focused to complete their academic goals. Alan spoke of his fiancé's (soon to be wife's) support: "My fiancé has been through a lot with me … she stuck with me through difficult situations.… She told me she was proud of me going to school for landscaping and wants to buy me a truck."

Several of the men spoke about having mentors who were friends, brothers, sisters, or cousins attending a university at the undergraduate or graduate level. These were trusted advisors they could reach out to when needed, which supports the literature of Palmer et al. (2011), who remind us that minority students reach out to their family and friends for advice and encouragement, especially through their first year.

Gene talked about his cousin:

> I got a cousin, close cousin, just graduated from law school, motivating me, inspired me, give me little prep talks once a week. And I think from the community I was, like, raised in, a lot of people didn't take that step to go to college, so I wanted to experience it. I wanted to make that step to see how it is.

When asked why they were inspired by these family and friends, many participants reflected on how important it was to make their family or friends proud of them. Peter spoke about his mentors and role models:

> Oh yeah, absolutely, yeah. I had about 10 close friends and only two graduated from college: one has his bachelor's degree and one is a grad student as well. So those two were my role models, they still are, because that's something I'm trying to get to now. But just really hearing from them that they're proud of me about the steps I'm taking to better my education, let alone becoming a man, it was really an overwhelming feeling.

In some instances, participants talked about being motivated by the need to prepare and be able to provide and care properly for their future family. Indeed, many of the men considered themselves strong role models who were inspiring others in their families to consider attending college.

Many of the participants were satisfied with the present academic and social integration supports through the learning community and social support groups. However, those who were part of the first cohorts and some of the participants who were not involved in the learning community felt more mentoring and peer mentoring was needed to support the first-year students. This study supports the literature of Bonner II and Bailey (2006), Foster (2008), Harris et al. (2011), and Harper and Harris (2012), who urged the use of mentors, staff, faculty, and positive peers to influence new students and attempt to reach those who have not become engaged or focused. Cuyjet (2006, p. 239) spoke of the need for institutions to have more people available to work with the young men who understand their behaviors and who don't think that "different is deficient" when working with African American males. These scholars also strongly urged gender- and race-specific clubs and organizations to support these students, especially through their first year of college.

Discussion

The men in this study were change agents who realized that starting or returning to college was a game changer that would increase their opportunities for a better lifestyle. The study findings emphasized their desire to gain more skills and education in order to change their lives and those of their families. Some of the participants spoke of wanting to be good providers for their future families, while others emphasized wanting to provide financial support for their immediate kin. Several men expressed a sense of pride about being the first in their family to go to college and wanting to make their family proud of them. Another goal for many of the men was to gain experience and bring their education, entrepreneurship, and commitment to improving their communities, all of which are consistent with the results from several studies (Riley, 2007; Smith, 2010; Stevens, 2007).

The findings are also consistent with studies by Herndon and Moore (2002), Herndon and Hirt (2004), and Guiffrida (2006) indicating the importance of family relationships for students' retention, persistence, and completion. Herndon and Hirt (2004) and Palmer et al (2011) agree that family involvement and support before and during college are critical factors for students to have successful college outcomes. Palmer et al. (2011) contend that cultural sensitivity is important in advancing mentors and supportive group relationships on campus because not all of the men come from homogenous families. This concurs with the study results because some of the men referred to their peers on campus as their brothers or cousins.

Many of the participants reflected on receiving inspiration as well as financial and emotional support for going to college from their immediate or extended family, while others

described the advice they received from college-educated family members. This study's findings support numerous others which state that family support and positive involvement profoundly affect minority students' success. Active involvement in their students' development through discussions of goals and career options increase the positive outcomes. First-generation students and their families can increase their cultural capital through exposure to college information and expectations at orientation, which can change family involvement from negative to positive due to the ability to reinforce institutional values and academic expectations (Guiffrida, 2006; Herndon & Moore, 2002; Palmer et al., 2011).

The participants felt strongly supported by the inclusive and welcoming Midwest campus environment, including faculty, classes, and support resources and staff. In line with Phinney (1987), Wong (2003) and Chavous et al. (2003), the students' racial centrality was supported through academic and social engagement such as the Achievers, the Brothers, the Great Thinkers, and other positive interactions with minority faculty and staff and the inclusive environment. These scholars assert that receiving supportive services and mentoring from a similar ethnic person or group helps ground the students and creates a stronger self-efficacy for them.

My study's findings support this literature, as the participants commented on facing some micro-aggressions in the community surrounding the campus and with some faculty but did not let it adversely affect their self –image, positive feelings about their college, or their academic self-efficacy. A well-developed racial/ethnic identity and self-efficacy can protect a targeted individual from injuries of self-esteem or distress, according to Seller and Shelton (2003). The

racial centrality model based on Phinney's (1990) ethnic identity theory makes the case that racial pride and connectivity protect minority students from racial discrimination.

Ethnicity relates to the Encouragement literature. According to Dagley et al. (2001), encouragement includes feeling good about oneself and having the ability to learn and empathize with others. Offering encouragement through networks of support enhances students' racial and ethnic pride. This was evident in the support systems offered by the Achievers, the Brothers, and the Great Thinkers. The perception of caring people beyond the students' immediate groups created a network of peers, faculty, and staff for the participants to bond with and be accountable to about their class attendance, study time, and commitment to seeking learning support in the Academic Center. This network of supportive people, according to the literature of Hausmann et al. (2007), enhanced the students' sense of belonging, which helped increase their level of academic and social integration.

The findings in this study are consistent with the literature of numerous scholars who emphasize building strong and frequent faculty, staff, and peer interactions and providing student engagement opportunities to increase students' feelings of belonging and academic self-efficacy (Astin, 1984, 1993; Beckles, 2008; Kuh, & Love, 2000; Roberts, 2009; Tinto, 1997, 2002; Wood & Turner, 2011). An important factor confirmed by participants was active involvement with faculty, staff, learning support resource areas, and other students in classes, clubs, and organizations. Astin's Involvement Theory (1984) contends involved students expend more energy on their campus interacting with faculty in and out of classes. Kuh and Love's Engagement Theory (2000) states that engagement equals the time and effort students put into their studies and other activities and the infrastructure that is in place to assist student learning.

Kuh and Love's (2000) student engagement theory describes the explicit link between student behaviors and effective educational practices. They note that all energy expended by students involving their college experiences affects their learning and social development.

My study results showed a link between peer interactions and academic success, which is consistent with earlier research by Astin (1984, 1993) about the importance of involvement with peers. Harper (2012) and Wood and Turner (2011) posit that peer involvement and social engagement are important but should be focused towards academic learning and student leadership instead of purely social in nature. They report students found socially centered interactions to be more distracting and this hampered academic focus and success. This aligns with my study results because the men noted that they chose to spend more of their time with peers who shared their values about school, those being the "right peers." The involved students did not view themselves as superior to those who were not engaged, and tried to draw them into more campus involvement. The participants referred to feeling "lucky" to be involved with supportive peers. These students were serving as strong role models and in some cases peer mentors, holding fellow students accountable for attending classes, finishing assignments, and engaging in student organizations in hopes of graduating together.

The narratives in the participants' own voices emphasized their desire and commitment to achieving their academic goals. Many of them were completing their sophomore year and a few were completing a credential. My study results support the research of other scholars (Tinto, 1983, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) who emphasized the importance of creating faculty relationships and positive campus interactions to gain students' institutional commitment in their first year. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) confirmed that faculty-student relationships greatly

affect students' decisions to persist or leave college in the first year. This type of persistence through the first year is imperative if more of these students are to realize their academic goals. Simply put, the results of my study affirm previous research because involvement matters greatly during the first year of college when the students' attachments are most tenuous and the institution's pull is the weakest (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Several programs laid the foundation for these types of mentoring and peer support and mentoring initiatives. Two of the longest running mentoring programs with chapters throughout the country are the Student African American Brotherhood and the 100 Black Men. One of the most widely recognized national mentoring programs is the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) founded by Dr. Tyrone Bledsoe in 1990 to address issues facing African American males at Georgia Southwestern State University. The program's mission is to increase the numbers of African American and Latino men graduating from colleges and universities by creating caring and supportive peer communities. The chapters have grown to number over 200 at colleges and universities, high schools, and middle schools in more than 39 states across the country.

The three-pronged mentoring model offers peer-to-peer student mentoring in colleges, and advisors to students and college student mentoring to high school and middle school students. The chapters operate through institutional memberships that grant students the ability to participate in a training program, create a chapter business plan, write an educational plan for each member, and implement a volunteer/service learning component. Students at all levels can participate in regional and national conferences. The program is geared towards the young men

self-organizing around the principle, “I am my brother’s keeper and together we will rise” (Cuyjet, 2006; SAAB website, 2016, http://saabnational.org/).

The 100 Black Men is a national organization composed of African American professionals whose mission is to improve the quality of African American communities and enhance the educational and economic opportunities for all African Americans. This organization has grown since its inception in 1993 to over 116 chapters with over 10,000 members dedicated to working with African American youth aged 8-18 in its Mentoring the 100 Way program using one-on-one mentoring, group mentoring, tag team, and peer mentoring techniques. The Collegiate 100 membership draws primarily from male African-American college students through chapters on university and college campuses in more than fifteen states and the District of Columbia.

The purpose of the Collegiate 100 is to implement the mentoring and tutoring programs of 100 Black Men. The Collegiate 100 participants assist with the development of the social, emotional, educational, and physical needs of youth who often have few or no positive role models in their communities. Each Collegiate 100 chapter has an advisor from the faculty or staff of the college or university who must remain active in the local chapter of 100 Black Men to ensure that the program operates efficiently and effectively (http://www.100blackmen.org/mission.aspx). These are two of the most widely known mentoring programs working with African American males from elementary school through college. Many other programs are offered in cities and at colleges and universities.

Midwest College is not an anomaly as a community college offering specialized support for minority males. When I attended the Minority Male Community College Consortium (M2C3)

working meeting in San Diego and participated in the webinar series, I interacted with community college colleagues from institutions across the nation offering minority male support programs. Some of the program staff reported seeing small gains in grades and improved developmental course sequence completion compared to non-program students. The milestones reported in webinar discussions are similar to those reported by the Achievers with cohorts numbering 10 or less and small percentage gains. Many of the program staff report minimal gains in long-term persistence graduation or transfer rates to universities.

Scaling up the initiatives to support more minority males was discussed at the M2C3 Consortium. One of the concerns voiced by many in attendance was finding broader support mechanisms and funding to scale up programs to reach more students. A national task force called to action by President Barak Obama had garnered major media attention over the course of the year. The meeting attendees viewed a short overview of the "My Brother's Keeper" Task Force, which emphasized the call to action for states, communities, and corporate, private and non-profit organizations to create a partnership to improve the lives of young men of color. The initiative goals are to develop a coordinated federal effort to address persistent opportunity gaps faced by young men of color and ensure all young people can reach their full potential.

The initiative could accomplish this by providing academic pathways with support from cradle to college to careers. The plan to improve the lives of young people was shaped by three interdependent priorities articulated by the President: (1) increasing engagement of state and local communities, (2) increasing partnerships and engagement with business, philanthropic and non-profit organizations, and (3) reviewing and reforming public policy. The Task Force

included these recommendations in its MBK 2014 60-day progress report to the Obama Administration (https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/053014_mbk_ report.pdf).

According to the 2016 MBK Progress Report, nearly 250 communities in all 50 states have accepted the "My Brother's Keeper" Community Challenge to cities, tribal nations and counties to build their own cradle-to-career My Brother's Keeper action plans. These partnerships include non-profits such as the "Achieving the Dream" initiative funded through the Lumina Foundation, which provides coaches and evidence based programming to support community colleges. Over $600 million in private-sector funds, philanthropic grants, and in-kind resources along with $1 billion in low-interest financing have been committed in this corporate and public alliance committed to MBK's plans for student success from cradle to college and careers (https://www.whitehouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper).

Limitations of the Study

This qualitative study was limited to interviews with male African American students at one Midwest regional community college, and the results were framed by the individual institutional characteristics and a sample population of 27 participants. A larger sample and varying institutional characteristics such as higher or lower percentages of minority faculty, staff, and students or a less welcoming environment could yield different findings.

Future Research

This research study has been an initial look at these students' perceptions and engagement. I think there are a number of feasible suggestions for future research. This study only looked at one campus at which the students perceived the institution to be a supportive and comfortable

environment. It would be interesting to conduct this type of study at multiple campuses and see what the students' perceptions yield.

One other consideration for further research would be to conduct additional research and analysis of successful academic "grit" and social engagement factors that lead to African American males' persistence through analysis of fall-to-fall persistence rates and cumulative grade-point averages. Finally, researchers could look at African American male athletes, since this is a viable option for many young men to gain access to college. It would be interesting to see college-going and engagement experiences from their perspective. The national collaborative movement for social change has also been reflected in the creation of a free consortium, the Minority Male Community College Collaboration (M2C3) offered through San Diego State University, which allows researchers and practitioners at community colleges the opportunity to collaborate in addressing the issue of advancing outcomes for men of color.

Many community colleges have programs, initiatives, or general efforts designed to enhance outcomes for historically underrepresented and underserved men of color**.** However, only 17 percent and 15 percent of Black and Latino men, respectively, earn a certificate, degree, or transfer from a community college to a four-year institution in six years. M2C3 is a project of San Diego State University's Interwork Institute and was established with a grant from the San Diego State University Presidential Leadership Fund. The goal of the project is to partner with community colleges across the United States to enhance access, achievement, and success among minority male community college students. M2C3's research and practice agenda prioritizes men who have been traditionally underrepresented and underserved in postsecondary education.

Hopefully, some of the collaboration and knowledge sharing will lead to future research projects (http://interwork.sdsu.edu/sp/m2c3/).

Implications for Community Colleges

If community colleges are going to raise persistence and completion rates for at-risk groups such as African Americans males, they have to create and support a welcoming environment. This means hiring diverse faculty, staff, and administrators who can provide support to these males. The programs created cannot meet the goals if they are marginalized with little money and less staff. They need institutional support and operational budgets to maximize the return on investment to help more students complete their academic programs. The colleges must provide adequate support for continuous formative assessment so programs can evaluate their ability to meet goals and objectives and create means to replicate best practices and scale to meet capacity.

The implication for student affairs/services professionals is the need for program development that takes into account the cultural norms and provides informal networking with the African American and Latino students, clubs and organizations to provide resources, and information to reduce the stigma of reaching out for help. With more community college students returning to classes with family and work responsibilities, rendering them unable to access services and engagement activities during college hours, additional use of technology and social media will become necessary. Mentoring programs and peer advisors are another means of providing support and outreach (Chiang et al., 2004).

In order to help more of the male African American students complete their academic goals, community college administrators will need to provide flexibility in scheduling, creating timely support mechanisms using more technology and social media, and program pathways with mixed presentations of online, hybrid, and in-class courses to help more students who cannot follow a traditional student timeline. This also applies to student support services and mentoring opportunities.

Students at community colleges are increasingly busy, and as Tinto (2002) pointed out, because of this, more engagement will need to take place in the classroom or through a variety of modalities. I encourage policy makers and academic and student affairs practitioners to consider Tinto's (2002) advice regarding making institutional adjustments to better engage students during their first year. Tinto (2002) stated that institutions could improve student persistence by focusing on five institutional conditions during the critical first year of college which, based on extensive research, were identified as best for promoting student persistence, especially during this watershed period. The conditions he listed were: level of expectation, accurate advice, guided support, involvement, and learning.

Tinto (2002) points out that high expectations lead to student success. He also reminds us that students need clear, consistent information about institutional requirements and adequate academic, social, and personal support. Wood (2011) concurs that African American males attending community college are often non-traditional-aged, having delayed entry to college, and many have more external responsibilities including work and families. Wood's (2011) research supports Tinto's (2002) in affirming that community colleges have to make institutional

adjustments in order to enhance the persistence and completion rates for African American males.

Tinto (2002) pointed out that these recommendations have worked for both two- and four-year institutions. It is my belief that the external landscape will continue to challenge higher education with ongoing budget constraints, less financial aid for students, and greater demands for quicker program and higher completion rates. Taking all of this into consideration, educational policy makers may consider a variety of programming options and funding streams. They could reconsider Tinto's (2002) recommendations and reshape institutional strategic planning. This approach could embrace and advance holistic first-year experience programming across divisions, thus serving more students in a sustainable manner. This paradigm shift could focus on creating support programs that address the needs of developmental/remedial students, veterans, first-generation and all minority student populations as part of scalable and sustainable first-year student initiatives. These holistic wraparound systems could focus on college-wide sustained support for all first-year students using learning communities to build cohorts and peer mentoring programs which build social, campus, and community service engagement.

These types of holistic programs will have the bridges built for assessing students' needs and support systems to assist students. The systems will guide students through cross-functional academic and student programming, giving students a plethora of service points. They could include faculty engagement opportunities, personal counseling, peer mentoring, learning communities, career planning, first-year college success classes, exposure to career programs and apprenticeships, service learning opportunities, financial aid advising and money management support, intrusive advising, and guidance to resources. This type of broad based initiative could

become the new “normal” versus “boutique” programming for select demographic groups. Thus, funding streams which hamper scaling of successful programming may be reduced through private-sector grants and federal policy programs initiated by the My Brother’s Keeper Initiative. This engagement between all stakeholders, according to the My Brother’s Keeper vision statement, is necessary for addressing the opportunity gaps faced by young boys and men of color and ensuring all American girls and boys can reach their full potential (https://www.whitehouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper). Community college administrators will need to collaborate across divisions within their own organizations in order to remove barriers to academic efficacy for African American men. More collaboration between academic and student services to approach teaching and serving students in a holistic manner will greatly benefit students’ ability to persist and graduate. In a unified strategic effort, college personnel should seek guidance, support, and funding from programs such as the Achieving the Dream and My Brother’s Keeper initiatives.

The national crisis of low credential completion continues to affect African American males entering the post-secondary education pipeline throughout the country. This topic gained attention at a time when African American males were making national news and trending on social media. However, national media coverage of demonstrations, blogs, and Twitter hashtag campaigns about violence against African American males in various parts of the country overshadowed their low college completion rates. Once again, racial stereotyping of African American teens and young men in hoodies or with pants sagging was in the media, but it wasn’t about the gangsta’ video images. This time it was due to racial profiling and/or harsh police tactics resulting in images of death for African American men.

The creation of the national "Black Lives Matter" campaign was a grassroots movement demanding social justice for African American males. This movement crossed age, race, and cultural lines to touch lives throughout the country. Racial and gender-based fear against African American males is now at the forefront of discussions about race in America. Many of these fear-based societal issues have affected the lives and education of African American males for several generations. These challenges require "the whole village" to work toward change in this country by providing more diversity training and hiring in all facets of society from education to law enforcement. What does a national social justice movement such as "Black Lives Matter" mean to the two-year colleges which position themselves as open access and often have "community" in their names? Will the leaders of such institutions take this opportunity to enhance community engagement by taking part or leading community conversations? These social issues challenge community college administrators, faculty, and staff to exercise their platform regarding community engagement. The colleges' employees and boards of trustees can exercise leadership roles in bringing community citizens and academic community members together to discuss taboo subjects of race relations and support, thereby building better police and minority community relations. They have a stake in supporting stronger communities.

Another way community college leaders can show they have a stake in building stronger communities and helping to advance minority males' success is by participating in national consortiums such as M2C3. This consortium offers free assessment tools and webinars. The members can share best practices and strategic planning strategies to advance campus involvement and support for minority males' programming. This national consortium has an "It takes a village" mindset, with over 70 community colleges' and universities' researchers and

practitioners working together to create stronger data-informed programs to assist African American and other minority males. I found this shared focus from such a large group of committed individuals to be both encouraging and inspiring.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study allowed the 27 African American males interviewed to give voice to their perceptions of their campus environment and college-going experiences. Through this study, we heard them reflect on their experiences and answer the whys behind the statistics about their feelings regarding their environment, academic and social integration, challenges and successes in college, and overall feelings about institutional support. The students informed us about why they may or may not be engaged with their campus, what challenges and successes they've experienced, and what can be done better to engage and support them. By lending their experiences to this study, the participants helped humanize their challenges and successes, giving educators the opportunity to understand how to better help them reach their academic goals and enter productive careers.

As those of us who are Student Affairs practitioners continue to reach out to the African American, Latino, and other minority males enrolling in community colleges, we should be cognizant that these men come to us from a wide range of backgrounds, K-12 educational foundations, and socioeconomic standings. The declining national enrollment and low persistence and completion history of minority males is not a local issue, existing on a solitary campus, but is problematic on both university and community college campuses. Improving the

academic outcomes and futures of African American and other minority males is a national issue with many implications.

We, as educators, should improve institutional environments and supports, while raising students' expectations for academic completion and teaching them to be "grittier" in order to succeed. Tyson said it best: "I feel that, then again, honestly, African American males have to want it. Sometimes it's not about where you go, or what's there, sometimes it's just about the effort."

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APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

Consent Form
Adult (18 or older)
Northern Illinois University

I agree to participate in the research project titled "African American Males' Perceptions of their Community College" being conducted by Marietta Turner, a doctoral student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to gain insights into what African American males feel about their college experiences and their campus environment.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: complete a Confidential Demographic Form and agree to participate in audio taped interviews for up to 2 hours. The interviews will take place in a quiet meeting room on the college campus. After the interviews, the tape and field notes will be transcribed and I will receive an e-mail of the transcribed interview for a member check to confirm accuracy in representation of my answers. All information will be maintained in a secure manner to retain the confidentiality of all participants' interviewed and their demographic information.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Marietta Turner 217-353-2048 / mturner115@gmail.com, her advisors, Dr. LaVerne Gyant, 815-753-1423 /lgyant@niu.edu, and Dr. Lee Rush, 815-753-8210/lrush@niu.edu. I also understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588/researchcompliance@niu.edu

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include insights into participants' feelings about their college going experiences. My answers can add to the body of knowledge. There will be no direct benefit to the participants in this research study, however, participation in this study may aid in better understanding male African American student' perceptions about community college and engagement with the campus community.

I understand that risks of participating in this study are minimal and include the possibility of some discomfort due to negative thoughts and/or memories which surface during the interview. I understand that I retain the right to discontinue any discussion that is too uncomfortable. I can also be referred to a counselor if I wish to further process any topics that caused me concern in the interview. I understand that all information gathered during this study will be kept confidential with a high regard for maintaining the confidentiality of participants' records and/or confidentiality of subjects. All participants will be given a pseudonym to be used in the interviews and the narrative sections of the study. Only the researcher will know the actual names of the participants. The tapes, notes and transcriptions will be will be maintained in the strictest confidence by use of secure software and locked file cabinets. The researcher will maintain all documents for five (5) years after conclusion of the study. The results of this study may be used for research, publication, teaching or presentations in educational settings. If research participants are discussed, my identity will be protected by using a study code number rather than my name or any personal identification information.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature of Subject _____ Date_____

I consent to be audio taped for this research project.

Signature of Subject _____ Date_____

APPENDIX B

CONFIDENTIAL DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION/STUDENT PROFILE

Confidential Demographic Information

Name _____

Age_____

Address _____

_____
City, State Zip code

Phone _____

Cell Phone _____

E-mail _____

If any transfer credits accepted, how many hours _____

Number of total credits completed _____

Hours of employment per week _____

Hours of school involvement per week _____

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW DISCUSSION TOPICS

Interview Discussion topics

1. Discussion about college-going experiences, both academic and social.

2. Discuss motivations for going to college.

3. Who have been your mentors both on and off campus?

4. Discussion about campus environment and academic and student development support.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Revised Interview Questions

1. Please describe what you like the best here at your college and what you like the least and, why?

2. If a friend or relative was thinking about attending here and asked you about this college, what would you tell them?

3. Who has been your mentor or mentors, both on and off campus, supporting your desire to get a college education? Tell me how they have helped you?

4. How comfortable are you on your campus? (Follow-up): Please describe the experiences and people you have encountered that that make you feel this way?

5. How do you spend your time outside of class when you are on campus? (Follow-up): If you don't stay on campus after classes, what are the reasons you leave?

6. Describe the activities and organizations you see available for African American males to take part in or join? (Follow-up) What would you suggest be added or changed?

7. What have been your biggest challenges (either academic or personal) to staying on track with your classes?

8. What has been the biggest motivation for you to attend and want to complete college?

9. How has your college experience changed you as a person and your relationships with family and friends?

10. Which people and departments on campus do you feel comfortable talking to when you have a question or a problem?

11. What do you feel are some things that could be done differently here to help you and your friends/peers feel supported in order to graduate with a certificate/degree or transfer to a four-year university?

12. As we conclude, is there anything you want to add? If you have more experiences that you feel would help me to better understand your life as a male African American community college student, please feel free to talk about them now. In conclusion, I want to thank you for being willing to talk with me and give you this $20.00 gift card in appreciation for your time.