African American Men in Higher Education: The intersection of Career Development and Educational Success

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE INTERSECTION OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

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Northern Illinois University, 2022
Carrie Kortegast, Director

This study analyzes the relationship between African American male students and the career services office. While there is extensive research on the barriers African American men face in a postsecondary environment, as well as previous research highlighting the impact career services has on student success, there is limited research on the intersection of these two groups. There has been a long standing disconnect due to several factors, which are discussed in the study. The implications of this information could inform the career services office on how to establish better relationships with this group of students and provide them with information that is both relevant and useful to them in their educational and career journey. Data was collected through focus groups and semistructured interviews. This information provided the basis for the conclusions, which were used to develop recommendations to address the issue.
AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE INTERSECTION OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

BY
LAMAR BLACK
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Doctoral Director:
Dr. Carrie Kortegast
DEDICATION

To my mother, Brenda Jean Booker, who has been so inspirational to me throughout her time on this earth and even upon her physical departure: I could not have done this without you and I hope that I have made you proud.
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PREFACE

The purpose of this research study was to gain a better understanding of the relationship between African American men and career services. Using a case-study approach, I interviewed nine African American men, three career counselors, and reviewed Career Services materials at a 4-year mid-size, public university. The following chapters detail my research study from exploring my topic to reporting on the findings and sharing my experience during the process in the reflection section.

In Chapter 1, I introduced the issue in which I will be studying and provided some background information on what has been studied in the past and the findings. This chapter was used for my dissertation proposal defense in February 2022. The study sought to understand how the career services office supported the career development of African American men.

Chapter 2 utilized a paper model in which I developed an article length chapter based on the findings from the study. The three themes that emerged were lack of awareness of career service resources, students’ reluctance to engage with career services and the lack of knowledge of the career development needs of African American men. Also, based on those findings several recommendations were mentioned that could assist in addressing the issues based on the findings.

Chapter 3 was a scholarly reflection where I highlighted my research experience and provided information on my process and what I learned during the study. It afforded me the opportunity to reflect on things that I would change and captured my thoughts on what the value
of the research holds to my profession. The chapter also afforded me the opportunity to explore ways in which I plan to use this research to address my topic within my institution.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

African American students are far less likely than their peers to utilize services provided by the Career Services office at colleges and universities (Handshake Report, n.d.). They often experience persistent systemic educational and economic barriers in accessing resources and guidance on college campuses including career services. Systemic barriers have attributed to the limited opportunities and advancement in the career development of African American men (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013) and post-college success. Some of the barriers include institutional racism, systemic racism, financial literacy, disenfranchisement, and secondary educational inadequacies (Garibaldi, 1991). Career development can be defined as “the processes and/or activities one practices to enhance their knowledge and skill set to transition, or advance their status in the workforce.” When compared to their White counterparts, African Americans have often been relegated to jobs that are considered inferior, which offer little to no opportunities for advancement or financial gain post-graduation (Miller, 2020). The lack of “social capital,” which can be defined as “resources available to facilitate upward mobility” (Parks-Yancey et al., 2006) limits African American men’s career development. According to Parks-Yancey (2012), these resources can include sharing details on employment opportunities, one’s social connection’s ability to influence hiring decisions on your behalf, and relationships with those who make hiring decisions.
The ability to access employment opportunities through career services has a direct impact on a student’s ability to find gainful employment both during their studies and upon graduation. While higher education is perceived as a primary source for providing economic and social opportunities, it also acts as an equalizer in the pursuit of equality across ethnic, socioeconomic and gender spectrums (Harper et al., 2009). The purpose of this case study is to understand how Career Services at Texas A&M – Corpus Christi supports students that are African American men in achieving their career goals. The following are research questions that will assist in guiding the study:

1. What career services programs and support services are available for African American men?
2. How do African American men students utilize Career Services?
3. What are the perceptions of African American men regarding career services?
4. What strategies do career counselors use in working with African American men?

Information will be gathered through review of documents, focus groups with African American men and interviews with career counselors. The events, activities and guidance provided by the career center can serve as equalizers to some of the barriers associated with African American men. Thus, it is necessary to examine barriers African American men experience in accessing Career Services as well as the services provided. This information can be used to help create more equitable access and outcomes.

Literature Review

The purpose of career service departments at colleges and universities is to educate and assist students with their career readiness preparation (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Career
services offices have evolved into departments that offer resume assistance, mock interviews, job
search tips, career exploration, employer engagement, mentorship, and various workshops on
relevant topics for students. Aside from the basic services of resume reviews, career fairs and
career counseling, career centers have prioritized the importance of developing connections with
employers, mentors, alumni, and career communities (Dey & Real, 2010). Career Centers
operate in four key areas, “career counseling/advising, instructional sessions and workshops, job
and internship opportunities, and networking sessions with alumni and other professionals”
(Schaub, 2012, p. 202). Career counselors need to be cognizant of the diverse attributes of the
students they serve, which can include cultural differences, age, educational challenges, religious
beliefs, sexual orientation, academic ability and other sociodemographic variables (Nassar-

According to Hartung & Bluestein (2002), Frank Parson’s three-step model for career
counseling is often used by career counselors. The first step is to assist the student in knowing
who they are. Second, students should obtain knowledge of the workforce. And third, the
students should be encouraged to relate the knowledge of self with the occupation. Students tend
to pursue occupations based on what they feel they would like to do and at times do not properly
assess or have very little knowledge of what that occupation entails on a day-to-day basis. The
basis of career counseling and planning is to disseminate career related information to students
while they self-assess to properly explore which careers would be best suited for them (Wessel,
1998). This lack of knowledge can lead to students changing academic programs while
potentially stunting their career development.

Career counselors should develop relationships with different racial and ethnic groups to
serve them properly in their career development needs (Parham & Austin, 1994). African
American college students that are first-generation and low income typically lack family members or immediate contacts who can provide information regarding the complexities of college life (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). These students lack “cultural capital,” which according to (Claybrooks & Taylor, 2016) is the necessary comprehension of the higher education academic dialect. Since African American students experience non-academic challenges that are different than those of White students, there continues to be a need for the development of culturally sensitive theories focused on the career counseling component (Chung, 2003; Whiston, 2003). With the career development process being non-sequential, when considering racial and ethnic groups, it is imperative that any stereotypical assumptions based upon gender, physical characteristics, as well as academic and career interests be eliminated (Cook et al., 2002).

Integrating culturally based career advising derives from the idea that an individual’s cultural influences are intertwined with their career development (Arthur & Collins, 2011). Career counselors need to obtain further insight into African American men’s experiences and how that influences their decision-making including career aspirations (Walsh et al., 2001).

Students from underrepresented groups are less likely to utilize career services at their institutions and tend to be more unaware that such services exist (Falconer & Hays, 2006). The outreach to African American men regarding programs and services available vary by different programs and institutions. However, career counselors, as frontline workers, ability to connect and relate to African American men is critical in outreach efforts and career center utilization. The empirical research on specific outcomes related to the career development of African American men in a higher education setting is limited. However, research on the general student population indicates students that engage with career services are more likely to demonstrate
higher levels of confidence regarding the acquisition of knowledge and workforce skills to be successful in the job market (Fadulu, 2018).

**Student Retention**

Based on previous research studies, completion rates for African American men are lower than both White and Asian students of the same gender (Farmer & Hope, 2015). African American men make up a disproportionate number of students impacted when evaluating aspects of withdrawal, low academic performance, and negative college experiences (Debb et al., 2018). National data indicates that two-thirds of African American men who enroll into a post-secondary institution do not finish their degrees (Wood & Palmer, 2015). Studies have indicated that access to career services can help with the recruitment and retention of students (Ceperley, 2013). Student’s career development has been found to increase student success and retention rates (Feldman, 2005). For instance, Niles and Harris-Bowlsbey (2017) found that when students were able to identify a post-secondary career path, there was a reduction in student attrition and improved focus on academics. First-year students who had clearly defined career goals had higher retention rates than those who had not established any (Hull-Blanks et al., 2005). Thus, student ambiguity regarding their career aspirations can impact student retention (Tinto, 1998).

When transitioning onto a college campus in which they are unfamiliar, African American students tend to experience a culture of isolation and alienation that impacts their probability of success as it relates to retention and graduation (Hurd, 2000). College students tend to focus solely on the academic component of higher education and neglect the other activities and resources outside of class (Scott, 2021). Additionally, developmental needs for African American students can range from racial identity development, mentorships, positive
peer influences, family involvement and community factors (Flaconer & Hays, 2006). According to McClain & Perry (2017), informal relationships with faculty of color tend to develop organically and can be transformed into meaningful connections for African American students that aid in their retention.

The ability of career services to provide customized services both in-person and virtually will allow for increased flexibility in connecting with students in spaces where they are comfortable. In building strong connections, career services can create customized career communities both on and off-campus that foster and cultivate student success centered upon the retention and career development of students (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Unfortunately, there is limited data on the retention outcomes associated specifically with African American men in higher education and career services.

**Student Employment**

The financial aspect of a student’s post-secondary journey is probably one of the most important as most students attending a post-secondary institution utilize some form of financial assistance (Staub, 2021). Disproportionately, African American college students come from low-income families and are usually first-generation college students (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), African Americans comprise 13% of the U.S. population, but 24% of that group ages 18 to 64 live in poverty. The ability to have access to financial support and guidance is often critical in low income and first-generation students ability to be successful during and post-college. Career services can provide critical information and support for students. This is done by assisting students in obtaining on-and-off campus employment via internships, work-study, full-time and part-time jobs both during their
undergraduate studies and post-graduation. Moreover, many career services offices are responsible for coordinating federal work-study programs, which allows students who receive financial aid the opportunity to work on campus. This program provides an opportunity for students to earn income while taking classes, but also allows them to remain within the college environment to assist with their integration into the campus environment. On-campus employment has the capacity to provide a deeper engagement into campus through activities that involved the campus community (Fede et al., 2017). For African American men who at times need that additional support and increased opportunities to acclimate to the campus environment, work-study programs can be a useful tool in accomplishing this.

Campus-based employment has been positively correlated with skills development and retention for students (Bluml, 2019). On-campus employment allows students to have additional interactions with peers, faculty, staff and administrators through daily work-based activities that can assist in forming meaningful and supportive relationships. Being employed on campus increases student’s knowledge of resources that are available to them (Benjamin & McDevitt, 2018). However, there has been little empirical research into on-campus employment and the career development for African American men.

College affordability and work opportunities has been a key factor in the success of minority students (Long & Riley, 2007). This includes access to work-study, internships and part-time employment. These opportunities can often help students pay for their college and living expenses. For African American men, the ability to obtain financial assistance is key in determining whether they persist through their college studies (Cho et al., 2008; Palmer et al., 2009) as well as access to post-college employment opportunities.
Support and Mentorship

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) indicates that roughly 13% of higher education administrators are African American and of that only 34% of those are male. Due to the lack of African American male administrators in higher education it would be difficult for African American men to find male mentors across campus and form those cultural relationships. Implications for the lack of African American men in administrative positions can have negative consequences for minority students who experience being disconnected from campus, the community, imposter syndrome, and are marginalized (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). African American men often refrain from seeking out faculty members for casual interactions (Wood and Turner, 2011). This is often due to the perceptions that faculty would be unsupportive of their needs. African American men’s experiences with a lack of mentoring and support on campus has implications for their success in college as well as their post-college career aspirations.

Career development support and mentorship is important for college students that are African American men. Black men, historically, have been restricted from positions of influence. Moreover, the marginalization of Black men has had implications on their ability to learn and develop in college (Palmer et al., 2014) which has consequences for their post-college career opportunities. Thus, providing career development and support can help address these historic inequities. This includes helping African American men develop self-efficacy (Hertel, 2002) and a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). Sense of belonging is the way students view themselves as it pertains to their value and acceptance within the campus environment (Brooms, 2016). A sense of belonging is a critical factor of a student’s post-secondary experience due to the impact
it has on a student’s behaviors and opinions (Uwah et al., 2008). Good mentorship can help African American men in developing a sense of belonging on campus.

Since retention can be tied to a student’s sense of belonging a student’s ability to adjust to the social environment in which they study can be directly impacted by the relationships they are able to form (Hausmann et al., 2009). Mentoring programs coordinated by career development centers can help foster students’ sense of belonging as well as career aspirations. For instance, an alumni mentorship program often pairs current students with an alumni mentor. For students of color, these experiences can be important networking opportunities as well as achieving career related goals. Moreover, mentors can also provide valuable information and guidance on how to navigate campus life and be a source of support.

This is essential because these connections will assist career service centers in engaging and assisting African American men while affirming the commitment of their programming efforts focused on acknowledging their professional development needs (Falconer & Hays, 2006). The mentioning of increased outreach, faculty support and peer guidance are just some factors associated with this disconnect. Also, the notion that African American men tend not to proactively seek assistance on their own could provide opportunities for career services to intentionally build those relationships. According to Lancaster & Xu (2017), connections with on-campus peers, advisors, faculty, and student services staff are influential connections that impact a student’s persistence and ability to graduate on time.

Conceptual Framework

This study will be framed by social cognitive career theory (SCCT), which according to Rogers & Creed (2011), is driven by environmental, behavioral, and personal factors which
influence a student’s career choice process. According to Tate et al. (2015) SCCT is a reliable tool when assessing career development for diverse populations. One’s belief about their ability to pursue and achieve specific outcomes that allow them to achieve a goal, or several goals helps reinforce their career interests and associated actions. According to Dickinson et al., (2016), SCCT allows one to readjust their self-efficacy beliefs by incorporating new experiences that will allow for a new sense of self-efficacy and related outcomes.

Components of SCCT that are applicable to this study are career goals, influences, self-efficacy, and expectations, which are all related to the activities of career exploration and planning (Rogers & Creed, 2011). Career goals are associated with a student’s career aspirations and occupational choice. For example, their desire to be an accountant, mechanical engineer or graphic designer. Influential factors that impact a student can range from family, friends, peers, and professors who the student consults with to provide constructive guidance. These individuals are known to have a positive impact on the student’s academic and professional choices, (Xu & Webber, 2018). Self-efficacy centers on one’s own belief that they can perform or achieve a goal or activity such as passing a class or becoming a student leader. Collectively, these components have a direct impact on a student’s success in higher education.

Williams (2017) argues that the perception in mainstream research portrays African American men as being less academically capable than White and Asian students. Career counseling techniques such as relationship building, assessment, goal setting, developing an action plan, and job market analysis assist in allowing students that are African American men to see themselves in roles that are typically held by their White counterparts thus enhancing their level of self-efficacy. For students who demonstrate a high self-efficacy in relation to a specific
career with compatible interests, an individual may still be discouraged from pursuing that career path if they feel the barriers associated with that path are substantial (Brown & Lent, 1996).

The experiences of the student participants regarding their level of engagement with the career services office will provide a clearer understanding of the reasoning associated with their lack of engagement. Also, it will help provide more context on their awareness of those services and how they relate to the student’s professional goals. For example, attrition rates among underrepresented minorities are high in STEM courses which are directly impacted by the experiences students have on campus related to their academic performance, selection of classes, and relationships with faculty and peers (Park et al., 2019).

Description of the Case

Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi is a public 4-year institution enrolling approximately 11,000 students. As a Hispanic-serving institution, roughly 51% of the student population identify as Hispanic whereas only 5% identify as African American. Over 50% of the overall student population is classified as first-generation college students (Planning & Institutional Research, 2021). The Career Services Office at Texas A&M – Corpus Christi is housed within the Institutional Advancement Division, which consists of Alumni Relations, Foundation Office, and Advancement Services. The institution has a centralized model for the career services in which all career related activities and programming are housed within one office. The Career Center has ten full-time staff members consisting of three Career Counselors, three Employer Relations personnel, one Administrative Assistant, one Associate Director, and one Director. The demographic breakdown of the staff is as follows – career counselors (3 White
females), employer relations (1 Black female and 2 White females), administrative assistant (1 Hispanic female), Associate Director (1 Black male) and Director (1 White female).

The Career Center hosts both virtual and in-person services and programs to support the career development of students. The services associated within the office ranges from hosting career fairs, mentorship, employer information sessions, workshops, mock interviews, resume reviews, job search assistance and business etiquette events. There are currently no specific programming and/or activities targeting African American men or other minority groups hosted by the office. Based on employment data obtained through student surveys, Houston, San Antonio and Dallas are the top three cities where graduates are employed within the state of Texas. For the 2020-2021 academic year there were 655 student appointments recorded with the career services office. Of the 549 African American students enrolled during the 2020-2021 academic year, only 21 African American students (5 men) were recorded as having an appointment at the Career Center during that timeframe. This disproportionate number is partly why I am interested in the results of this study not only as an African American educator, but also as Career Services professional. The information obtained from this research inquiry could potentially lead to strategic initiatives being put in place to better assist our African American men and possibly other minority students as well.

Research Design

The following sections will describe the theoretical underpinnings, methodological approach, research site, participants, as well as data collection and analysis methods used for this research study. This study will use a qualitative case study approach to understand how Career Services at Texas A&M – Corpus Christi supports African American men in achieving their
career goals. A qualitative design is appropriate for this study as I am trying to uncover how individuals feel regarding their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Also, this research is intended to identify any gaps in the services provided by the Career Services department for African American men. Due to the exploratory nature of the research being conducted it is best to use qualitative methods (Stake, 1995). Also, due to the limited research on this topic a qualitative approach will assist me in taking an in-depth look at gaining a better understanding of the intersection between career services and the career development and post-secondary success of African American men.

A case study approach focuses on how and what questions that allow the researcher a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding the topic being studied (Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995). Qualitative inquiry sets the stage to investigate experiences related to a person’s thinking patterns, which are much more challenging to obtain using traditional exploratory techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This study will take an in-depth approach into the attitudes, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions of these students and how that impacts their career development and success as it relates to the Career Services office.

The epistemology underlying this study is constructivism. An individual’s social interpretation of their realities are the basis in which they construct meaning and this is the concept in which constructivism is built upon (Searle, 2007). For example, people can partake in the same activity and have varying experiences based on their interpretation of that activity (Crotty, 2020). According to Stake (1995), “Most contemporary qualitative researchers nourish the belief that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered. The world we know is a particularly human construction” (p. 99). Thus, the focus of this study is on participants
perspectives of how career services is supporting African American men in their career
development and academic success.

Case Study Methodology

Case study research attempts to understand the “how” and “why” (Stake, 2005) of a
phenomenon. For this case study the phenomenon under investigation is how African American
men interact and engage with the office of Career Services and the impact this has on their career
development and academic success. The perspectives of African American men and the career
counselors will be explored, as this will help to better understand what services are being
provided and used, as well as what services are needed.

There are three main types of concepts associated with case studies – explanatory,
exploratory, and descriptive (Yin, 2014). I will be using the exploratory model for this research,
which is best used to further our understanding of intricate social phenomena. Stake (2000)
defines case study as the study of a “bounded system” (p. 436). According to Creswell (2002),
“Bounded’ means that the case is separated out for research in terms of time, place, or some
physical boundaries” (p. 485). The bounded system for this study is African American male
students on the TAMU-CC campus who are enrolled full-time and classified as a sophomore or
higher. I will be excluding all other students who do not have that classification. Also, since only
the activities and programming associated with the career services office will be used, I will also
exclude all other student service departments and programs on campus.
Participants

The selection process associated with qualitative research is a critical factor, as the participants' ability to interact amongst one another assists in the development of data (Kitzinger, 2006). For this research study, I will use “criterion sampling” as my tool to identify and recruit participants. “Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). Students will be selected based on the following criteria: African American men, classification of a sophomore or above, and enrolled full-time. Freshmen will be excluded because they have minimal engagement with the Career Services office. I will also be seeking the assistance of our three career counselors who are assigned to the following academic colleges: Science/Engineering, Business, Liberal Arts, Nursing/Health Sciences and Education/Human Development. The criteria for this will be that they have the job title of “Career Counselor”. All of the career counselors are White females.

Data Collection

A unique characteristic of case study methodology can be described as utilizing various sources that are able to provide a realistic view of their experiences (Stake, 1995). With that, I will be using multiple data collection methods for this research inquiry to gain a holistic understanding from both the students and the career counselors. First, I will conduct the focus group interview with students, which should allow me to develop themes and help frame my questions for the second step, which will be semi-structured one-on-one interviews with the Career Counselors. Third, I will use a document analysis technique and review both the digital
and physical marketing materials of the department. These should provide enough information to formulate accurate and verifiable conclusions.

To gather the necessary data from the students I will be using a focus group, as it will be key in determining how these students feel regarding the services being offered to them and how those services relate to their development and success (Appendix A). This approach allows for the researcher and participant to interact intimately, which proves to be advantageous to obtaining the participants authentic thoughts and realities (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Through these intimate interactions researchers can gain more insight into the thought processes that dictate the participants actions (Robottom & Hart, 1993). Focus groups is a widely used method of data collection when conducting qualitative research (Morgan, 1996). At times focus groups are commonly linked to other data collection methods such as interviews, which include group, one-on-one and semi-structured formats (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Focus groups and interviews are ideal when the researcher wishes to uncover the experiences and beliefs of the participants (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). During a qualitative study, focus groups allow the researcher to gather data from a small group of people in an unstructured manner that allows for in-depth discussion about a particular topic, (Wilkinson, 2004). The informal nature of the focus group being conducted in the natural environment of the subject or individuals is another advantage, (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Based on Kitzinger’s (2006) recommendation, when conducting the study within the confines of the individual’s natural environment, this impacts not only their comfort level, but allows for more synergy amongst the group.

The second method will be semi-structured interviews of the career counselors, which will allow me to guide the interview with specific open-ended questions that will allow for additional inquiry (Appendix B). Interviews are often used “to find out from people those things
we can’t observe” (Patton, 1980, p. 196). The interviews will be structured around the following question types: 1) background/demographic, (2) opinion/belief, (3) knowledge, (4) experience/behavior, (5) sensory and (6) feeling (Merriam, 2002). Esterberg (2002) described a pattern for general and specific questions, called, “open-ended” questions, and cautioned against dichotomous or leading questions, which could lead to a closed style of questioning. My plan is to conduct these interviews in a conversational type of manner, as to ensure I can capture as much information about each career counselor’s process related to advising African American men.

In researching the Career Services website, the center offers general assistance and programming to all students regarding recruitment events, resume review, mock interviews, and job search tips, but there is no information pertaining to specific groups of students. Also, in conducting a review of our marketing materials, there is no information pertaining to specific groups of students and how they are assisted. “Document analysis is a qualitative systematic analytic procedure “for reviewing or evaluating documents-both printed and electronic” (Bowen 2009, p. 27). Due to the lack of diversity events and targeted information this may serve as a deterrent to African American men from engagement with the career center and the associated events.

Data Analysis

According to Miles et al, (2013), within qualitative research the stages of data analysis consist of data condensation, data display and conclusion, and are intertwined throughout the entire process. Another component of case study research design is the unit of analysis. The unit of analysis can be described as the component the research study is concentrated upon (Yin,
The unit of analysis in this case study will be African American men’s experiences with the career services office and the services provided. A critical factor of case study research design is to develop a linkage between suggestions and the data. As I analyze the data, I will attempt to identify themes and patterns that emerge within the case.

In most cases data coding will be used as a tool to assist in identifying emerging themes (Yin, 2014). As the information is analyzed it will be important to create codes to assist with the identification of patterns and other relevant themes that emerge. Miles et al., (2013) suggests that “coding” is a short phrase that summarizes the written or visual data set to allow for a better understanding. Within this lies a first- and second-cycle coding process, which allows a summarization and grouping of the data. Along with coding the information I will make use of “jottings” that I can reference to gain a better understanding of what is being stated, capture the full scope of the participants feelings, and ensure I am asking the proper questions. This will also allow me to ask follow-up questions later if I need further clarification from the participants. Miles et al., suggests that “jotting” assists the coding process by forming a deeper understanding of what the core issue or concern may be to one’s feelings and/or thoughts outside of what they initially share.

According to Miles et al. (2013), vivo coding will assist in identifying specific cultural phrases and/or words used by a particular group. I will do this by using an open-coding technique, which, according to Esterberg (2002), is a process where “you work intensively with your data, line by line, identifying themes and categories that seem of interest” (p. 158). Since I am interviewing African American students, I must be cognizant of the cultural difference between them and the career counselors who are not African American and the terminology that may be used during the interview process. Second, I will use emotion Coding, as this will help
capture the individual experiences and/or feelings of each student regarding the career services office. I will analyze the information provided by both the career counselors and students to determine if there are any matching themes and/or patterns that emerge.

In the second cycle of the coding process, I will use pattern coding, which, according to Miles et al., (2013) allows you to group the summaries of first-cycle codes into smaller themes and categories. This will allow me to break down the information I obtained from both the students and career counselors and identify any correlations and/or patterns in their responses that I can later map. Mapping the codes should allow me to easily determine to what level of connectedness is present amongst the responses. Once the data has been sorted and coded, we can construct a matrix, which according to Miles et al., (2013) will allow us to examine the intersection between the two groups (i.e., students and career counselors). This will make it easier to identify and view themes and/or patterns associated with the data and formulate viable conclusions.

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2000). To ensure accuracy of the information gathered I will provide all participants with a summary of the details and request that they confirm that details and findings have been interpreted properly. The second strategy used will be triangulation, which is the use of multiple data sources (Hentz, 2012). Triangulation can be considered a critical component of case study research when considering the reliability of the process (Stake, 2000). I will be using a data triangulation technique, which will allow me to compare the information obtained from career services staff with the details shared by the students. This will assist in identifying areas of disconnect and areas of agreement. Triangulation offers a more vigorous understanding of the research problem while discovering details that typically go unnoticed when only using one method (Renz et al., 2018).

Positionality

Currently, I serve as the Associate Director in which I assist the Director in the general operations of the office while also leading our Employer Relations team. I oversee the marketing and website for the office. I also supervise a Marketing Specialist who is tasked with creating and posting the content for our programming activities. Being that I am a Career Services professional I have personally witnessed the lack of engagement with our office from African American men at the institution. Based on that observation I feel there is a disconnect between our office and this specific group of individuals. I know we do not proactively reach out to this group of students, but what I do not know is why? Activities that we host such as career fairs, employer information sessions, resume workshops and others tend to lack the presence of African American men. The marketing that is conducted is general in nature and not focused on specific needs nor benefits to varying ethnic groups, which could be impacting the level of
engagement with these activities. Also, because we do not have any African American career counselors there may be a sense of distrust and lack of understanding with African American male students towards the current career counselors. This research study can potentially identify some of these items and provide insight as to the “why” and “how” questions I am trying to answer.

Being an African American male, I feel that I can personally relate to some of the experiences this group of students have gone through while conducting their undergraduate studies. Having experienced similar circumstances while attending undergrad myself, I am eager to see if those same gaps in services are prevalent now and if students have experienced similar feelings of isolation as I did. The feeling of isolation tends to lead to actions and thoughts associated with depression, lack of focus and low academic achievements. Some of these feelings I have personally experienced and been informed by friends based on their experiences, so the information and outcomes obtained in this study can potentially provide the basis for future studies.

Significance

The significance of this study will be first to determine what the disconnect is between African American men and Career Services. Secondly, remove any barriers to African American men career development and success. Third, identify what collaborations and partnerships need to be established between Career Services and other departments on campus to effectively assist these students. Lastly, ensuring that there is intentional and proactive programming and outreach to this group of students. Based on the results of this research study it may also inform when to engage African American male students during their academic journey (e.g., freshman year) and
in what ways should they be engaged to achieve a more positive experience. The actions taken based on the results of this study can have a positive impact on the career and educational success of African American male students. Creating and launching an intentional outreach strategy can assist with increasing the persistence, graduation, and employment rate of this group. It may also lead to an assessment of the current staffing related to the diversity aspect within the department and how that creates an inclusive and engaging atmosphere for all students.
CHAPTER 2
AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE INTERSECTION OF CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

African American students are far less likely than their peers to utilize services provided by the Career Services office at colleges and universities (Handshake Report, 2021). They often experience persistent systemic educational and economic barriers in accessing resources and guidance on college campuses including career services. Systemic barriers have attributed to the limited opportunities and advancement in the career development of African American men (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013) and post-college success. Some of the barriers include institutional racism, systemic racism, financial literacy, disenfranchisement, and secondary educational inadequacies (Garibaldi, 1991). According to Holland’s theory on career development (Erdogan, 2014), it can be described as the processes and/or activities one practices to enhance their knowledge and skill set to transition, or advance their status in the workforce. When compared to their White counterparts, African Americans are more likely to be in jobs that are considered inferior, which offer little to no opportunities for advancement or financial gain post-graduation (Miller, 2020). The lack of “social capital,” which can be defined as resources available to facilitate upward mobility (Parks-Yancy et al., 2006) limits African American men’s career development. According to Parks-Yancey (2012), these resources can include sharing details on employment opportunities, one’s social connection’s ability to influence hiring decisions on your behalf, and relationships with those who make hiring decisions.
The ability to access employment opportunities through career services has a direct impact on a student’s ability to find gainful employment both during their studies and upon graduation. While higher education is perceived as a primary source for providing economic and social opportunities, it also acts as an equalizer in the pursuit of equality across ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender spectrums (Harper et al., 2009). The purpose of this case study was to understand how Career Services at my institution supports undergraduate students that are African American men in achieving their career goals. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What career services programs and support services are available for African American men?
2. How do African American men students utilize Career Services?
3. What are the perceptions of African American men regarding career services?
4. What strategies do career counselors use in working with African American men?

Previous research suggests that African American men are less likely to engage with Career Services. Findings from this study can provide a better understanding of “why” this disconnect exists and identify ways to support their career development and success in the future.

For this study I will focus on students who identify as “African American” as their experiences are unique to their ethnic orientation. This is important to ensure the integrity of my research so it does not include the experiences of other individuals who may identify as “Black”, but not specifically African American. In the literature review I will be using “African American” and “Black” interchangeability based upon the authors use of the term.
Literature Review

The purpose of career service departments at colleges and universities is to educate and assist students with their career readiness preparation (Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014). Career services offices and departments offer resume assistance, mock interviews, job search tips, career exploration, employer engagement, mentorship, and various workshops on relevant topics for students. Aside from the basic services of resume reviews, career fairs and career counseling, career centers have prioritized the importance of developing connections with employers, mentors, alumni, and career communities (Dey & Real, 2010). Career services operate in four key areas, “career counseling/advising, instructional sessions and workshops, job and internship opportunities, and networking sessions with alumni and other professionals” (Schaub, 2012, p. 202). The career readiness process consists of several components that a student should be engaged throughout their academic journey that can assist in their career development and success.

Career Services used to be seen as more of a transactional entity, but over the past several years they are shifting to a more transformational approach in engaging with students (Schlesinger et al., 2022). When career services staff are able to engage with students in a conversational type of manner they are asking questions to gain a better understanding of what the student needs and how best to assist their students. The building of trust amongst professional staff and students allows students to gain more confidence that their success matters.

Figure 1. outlines a model of the career readiness process for an undergraduate student. Student employment is the beginning of a student’s workforce experience where they can gain first-hand knowledge of what an occupation entails. While a student gains workforce experience,
they can be supported from multiple sources: career counselors, workforce mentors, co-workers, and faculty. The knowledge and skills they gain from the experience provides them with better opportunities to transition into gainful employment upon graduation.

Figure 1. Career readiness process.

Career counselors play an important role in the support of students. They need to be cognizant of the diverse attributes of the students they serve, which can include cultural differences, age, educational challenges, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, academic ability, and other sociodemographic variables (Nassar-McMillan, 2014). Parson’s three-step model for career counseling is often used by career counselors (Hartung & Bluestein, 2002). The first step is to assist the student in knowing who they are. Second, students should obtain knowledge of the workforce. And third, the students should be encouraged to relate the knowledge of self with the occupation. Students tend to pursue occupations based on what they feel they would like to do.
and at times do not properly assess or have very little knowledge of what that occupation entails on a day-to-day basis.

The basis of career counseling and planning is to disseminate career related information to students while they self-assess to properly explore which careers would be best suited for them (Wessel, 1998). According to Krieger & Johnson (2018), it is critical for first-generation college students to be educated on how to connect their academic program and courses to various career paths. A student’s ability to see multiple occupational options associated with their program of study provides them with multiple pathways of success. For example, a student pursuing a nursing degree can not only become a nurse practitioner, clinical nurse specialist (CNS), or registered nurse (RN), but also find employment on the administrative side and provide oversight and direction to nursing personnel and receive the same or similar level of satisfaction. A lack of guidance and focus can lead to students changing academic programs while potentially inhibiting their career development.

African American college students that are first-generation and low income typically lack family members or immediate contacts who can provide information regarding the complexities of college life (Winkle-Wagner, 2009). These students lack “cultural capital,” which according to (Claybrooks & Taylor, 2016) is the necessary comprehension of the higher education environment. Since African American students experience non-academic challenges that are different than those of White students, there continues to be a need for the development of culturally sensitive theories focused on the career counseling component (Chung, 2003; Whiston, 2003). With the career development process being non-sequential, when considering racial and ethnic groups, it is imperative that any stereotypical assumptions based upon gender, physical characteristics, as well as academic and career interests be eliminated (Cook et al., 2002).
Integrating culturally based career advising derives from the idea that an individual’s cultural influences are intertwined with their career development (Arthur & Collins, 2011). Career counselors need to obtain further insight into African American men’s experiences and how that influences their decision-making including career aspirations (Walsh et al., 2001).

Students from underrepresented groups are less likely to utilize career services at their institutions and tend to be more unaware that such services exist (Falconer & Hays, 2006). The outreach to African American men regarding programs and services available vary by different programs and institutions. However, career counselors, as frontline workers, ability to connect and relate to African American men is critical in outreach efforts and career center utilization. The empirical research on specific outcomes related to the career development of African American men in a higher education setting is limited. However, research on the general student population indicates students that engage with career services are more likely to demonstrate higher levels of confidence regarding the acquisition of knowledge and workforce skills to be successful in the job market (Fadulu, 2018). Career counselors have the ability to develop relationships with different racial and ethnic groups to serve them properly in their career development needs (Parham & Austin, 1994). For example, African Americans have experienced workplace biases for things such as their hair style. By providing students with the proper information on how to seek out and identify institutions that practice diversity and inclusiveness, they will be able to assess whether that employer fits their needs as a young professional.

According to Gray (2022), when it comes to decision making related to how you market your services and programs to the student body, without assessing data to assist in guiding your strategy; the career center will fail to address groups that are not benefiting from these services.
Dr. Overton-Healy (Gray, 2022) mentions how not only are professional staff dealing with student barriers and issues of yesterday, but now those issues have been compounded by things like COVID-19; thus creating new barriers students must overcome related to anxiety and a greater caution when transitioning into adulthood. Career Services personnel must take these circumstances into account when engaging with their student body. A career counselors’ ability to connect with students around both new and previous issues can serve as a key factor in gauging that student’s mindset into their self-efficacy and probability for success.

Conceptual Framework

This study was framed by Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which according to Rogers & Creed (2011), is driven by environmental, behavioral, and personal factors which influence a student’s career choice process. According to Tate et al. (2015) SCCT is a reliable tool when assessing career development for diverse populations. One’s belief about their ability to pursue and achieve specific outcomes that allow them to achieve a goal, or several goals helps reinforce their career interests and associated actions. According to Dickinson et al., (2016), SCCT allows one to readjust their self-efficacy beliefs by incorporating new experiences that will allow for a new sense of self-efficacy and related outcomes. Components of SCCT that are applicable to this study are career goals, personal influences, self-efficacy, and expectations, which are all related to the activities of career exploration and planning (Rogers & Creed, 2011).

Career goals are associated with a student’s career aspirations and occupational choice. For example, their desire to be an accountant, mechanical engineer or graphic designer.
Influential factors that impact a student can range from family, friends, peers, and professors who the student consults with to provide constructive guidance. These individuals are known to have a positive impact on the student’s academic and professional choices, (Xu & Webber, 2018). Self-efficacy centers on one’s own belief that they can perform or achieve a goal or activity such as passing a class, becoming a student leader, or transitioning into a specific occupation. Expectations can be determined individually, or externally by others based on what they feel you should achieve. Collectively, these components have a direct impact on a student’s success in higher education.

Case Study Methodology

Case study research attempts to understand the “how” and “why” (Stake, 2005) of a phenomenon. For this case study, the phenomenon under investigation is how African American men interact and engage with the office of Career Services and perceptions of how this influences their career development and academic success. The perspectives of African American men and the career counselors will be explored, as this will help to better understand what services are being provided and used, as well as what services are needed.

There are three main types of case studies – explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive (Yin, 2014). This study used an exploratory model for this research, which is best used to further understanding of intricate social phenomena. Stake (2000) defines case study as the study of a “bounded system” (p. 436). According to Creswell (2002), “‘Bounded’ means that the case is separated out for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries” (p. 485). The bounded system for this study was career services for African American men at the research site.
Description of Site

The research site was a public 4-year institution that enrolled approximately 11,000 students. As a Hispanic-serving institution, roughly 51% of the student population identify as Hispanic. Only 5% of students identified as African American. Over 50% of the overall student population is classified as first-generation college students. The Career Services Office was housed within the Institutional Advancement Division, which consists of Alumni Relations, Foundation Office, and Advancement Services. The institution has a centralized model for the career services in which all career related activities and programming were housed within one office. The Career Center had ten full-time staff members consisting of three Career Counselors, three Employer Relations personnel, one Administrative Assistant, one Associate Director, and one Director. The demographic breakdown of the staff were: career counselors (3 White women), employer relations (1 Black woman and 2 White women), administrative assistant (1 Hispanic woman), Associate Director (1 Black man) and Director (1 White woman).

The Career Center hosted both virtual and in-person services and programs to support the career development of students. The services associated within the office ranged from hosting career fairs, mentorship, employer information sessions, workshops, mock interviews, resume reviews, job search assistance and business etiquette events. There were currently no specific programming and/or activities targeting African American men or other minoritized student groups (e.g., Latinx students, LGBTQ+ students) hosted by the office.

Based on employment data obtained through student surveys, Houston, San Antonio and Dallas are the top three cities where graduates were employed within the state of Texas. For the 2020-2021 academic year there were 655 student appointments recorded with the career services
office. Of the 549 African American students enrolled during the 2020-2021 academic year, only 21 African American students were recorded as having an appointment at the Career Center during that timeframe. Of the 21 African American students, only 5 were men. This study was designed to better understand the disproportionately low usage of career services by African American men.

Participants

The selection process associated with qualitative research is a critical factor, as the participants' ability to interact amongst one another assists in the development of data (Kitzinger, 2006). For this research study, I used criterion sampling as my tool to identify and recruit participants. “Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). Students were selected based on the following criteria: African American males, classification of a sophomore or above, and enrolled full-time. Freshmen will be excluded because they have minimal engagement with the Career Services office. I interviewed nine students of which four occurred during a focus group while the remaining five were completed using one-on-one semi-structured interviews via Zoom videoconferencing software due to the time constraints associated with conducting another focus group. The classification year of these students was as follows – five juniors and four seniors.

I also interviewed three career counselors who were assigned to the following academic colleges: Science/Engineering, Business, Liberal Arts, Nursing/Health Sciences and Education/Human Development. The three career counselors participated in one-on-one
interviews using Zoom as well. The Zoom platform was preferred because of the live transcribing feature, which allowed for a more convenient way to transcribe interviews. All names below are pseudonyms to enhance confidentiality. I also did not include a participant table as another strategy to enhance confidentiality as participants might be identifiable though disaggregated demographic information.

Data Collection

A unique characteristic of case study methodology can be described as utilizing various sources that are able to provide a realistic view of their experiences (Stake, 1995). With that, I used multiple data collection methods for this research inquiry to gain a holistic understanding from both the students and the career counselors. First, I conducted a single focus group consisting of four students followed by five semi-structured individual interviews with additional students. The focus group lasted approximately an hour and a half while the semi-structured interviews were each about an one hour in length. These interviews with students allowed me to develop themes and help frame my questions for the second step, which was three semi-structured individual interviews with the Career Counselors. Third, I used a document analysis technique and reviewed both the digital and physical marketing materials of the department. These provided supplemental information about how career services were being communicated and to whom.

Usage of the focus group was key in determining how these students felt regarding the services being offered to them and how those services relate to their development and success.
This approach allows for the researcher and participant to interact intimately, which proves to be advantageous to obtaining the participants authentic thoughts and realities (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Through these intimate interactions researchers can gain more insight into the thought processes that dictate the participants actions (Robottom & Hart, 1993). Focus groups are a widely used method of data collection when conducting qualitative research (Morgan, 1996). At times focus groups are commonly linked to other data collection methods such as interviews, which include group, one-on-one and semi-structured formats (Parker & Tritter, 2006). Focus groups and interviews are ideal when the researcher wishes to uncover the experiences and beliefs of the participants (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). During a qualitative study, focus groups allow the researcher to gather data from a small group of people in an unstructured manner that allows for in-depth discussion about a particular topic, (Wilkinson, 2004). The informal nature of the focus group being conducted in the natural environment of the subject or individuals is another advantage, (Krueger, 2015). Based on Kitzinger’s (2006) recommendation, when conducting the study within the confines of the individual’s natural environment, this impacts not only their comfort level, but allows for more synergy amongst the group.

The second method, which was semi-structured interviews of the career counselors, allowed me to guide the interview with specific open-ended questions that set the stage for additional inquiry. According to Patton (2002), interviews allow us to obtain information on things that tend to be unobservable. The interviews were structured around the following question types: 1) background/demographic, (2) opinion/belief, (3) knowledge, (4) experience/behavior, (5) sensory and (6) feeling (Merriam, 2002). Esterberg (2002) described a pattern for general and specific questions, called, “open-ended” questions, and cautioned against dichotomous or leading questions, which could lead to a closed style of questioning. I conducted
these interviews in a conversational type of manner, which allowed me to capture relevant information about each career counselor’s process related to advising African American men.

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Positionality

Currently, I serve as the Associate Director in which I assist the Director in the general operations of the office while also leading our Employer Relations team. I oversee the marketing and website for the office. I also supervise a Marketing Specialist who is tasked with creating and posting the content for our programming activities. Being that I am a Career Services professional I have personally witnessed the lack of engagement with our office from African American men at the institution. Based on that observation I feel there is a disconnect between our office and this specific group of individuals. I know we do not proactively reach out to this group of students, but what I do not know is why? Activities that we host such as career fairs, employer information sessions, resume workshops and others tend to lack the presence of African American men. The marketing that is conducted is general in nature and not focused on specific needs nor benefits to varying ethnic groups, which could be impacting the level of engagement with these activities. Also, because we do not have any African American career counselors there may be a sense of distrust and lack of understanding with African American male students towards the current career counselors. This research study can potentially identify some of these items and provide insight as to the “why” and “how” questions I am trying to answer.
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Findings

This study sought to understand how Career Services supported African American men in achieving their career goals. The information shared during the interviews lead to the development of three themes: lack of awareness, reluctance to engage, and lack of knowledge. The following outlines these themes and conclusions.

Theme 1: Lack of Awareness of Career Services Resources

In discussing students’ knowledge of the Career Services office and what its functions were, the students all had a general perception that the career services office offered services for resume reviews and mock interviews. When asked about their knowledge of the career center, James stated “I have limited knowledge of career services other than the fact they assist with resume reviews, professional clothing, and other general services. I used once before to review my resume as a class requirement.” Both students and career counselors mentioned that some
faculty have assignments that require students to visit or participate in a career services event. Other than that assignment, James had no other engagement with the career center, nor did they seek further engagement after the completing the assignment. Frank shared similar sentiments, but added “they do not offer services that are applicable to me.” Frank made this comment in reference to the specific major the student is pursuing. Frank went on to share that the services provided were “too broad” in nature and were not useful for the career in which they are pursuing. When asking if anyone else would like to share their experience, Jeff mentioned hearing about the services through various channels, but ultimately was unfamiliar with the applicability of the services.

Tommy posed the question “what do they offer for me?” then added, “I have already participated in interviews while pursuing employment on campus. So, I do not feel I need to come into the career services office to participate in a mock interview.” Multiple participants shared this sentiment of not knowing what career services could do for them. Some students did not see how the services were different from career development opportunities they had in high school. For instance, Chris followed that comment with “in high school, I participated in the Future Business Leaders Association which holds mock interviews.” Students did not seem to see the need to engage in practice interviews.

Paul mentioned they received emails from the career services office about their services, but “most do not apply to my major, so I started ignoring them.” They went onto share that “due to the abundance of emails they receive from career services and in order to not waste time with ones that are not applicable, the career services office should narrow down the emails to make them relevant to the recipient.” Students also indicated wanting more specific information for Black students. Terry shared:
If there was like a general email or just like some general communication with all of us [Black students], I think that would benefit a lot. Simply because there are White students who will seek their career counselor because, of course, they have a background of people in their life who have gone to college and who have been successful, and they know that they utilize career services and things like that. On the contrary, that on the other side rather there’s Black students who maybe were first gen and we have no idea what career services could offer us or we have dreams of doing a job, but we feel like we have to do it ourselves because we feel like our peers have also done it themselves, our White peers.

This statement highlighted both the need for direct communication for Black students but also the need for more explanation about how, why, and what career services can do to support them specifically.

Harris and Jake worked as interns in the career center had some similar and different perspectives to the other students. They shared that prior to working in career services they held similar perspectives to the other participants regarding having a narrow understanding of the type of services (e.g., resume review, mock interviews) career services offered as well as had limited engagement with the office. Harris stated, “prior to me working in the career services office, I wasn’t sure how they could assist me, but once I was able to gain more knowledge as to how they assist students my perspective changed.” They highlighted how mock interviews were helpful and how career counselors guided students in the job search process. Jake mentioned their desire at one point to become a career counselor, so they actively sought out career services based on their desire to “help students navigate the career space while embracing who they are.” Also, they highlighted resources such as resume reviews and mock interviews were useful in that “they provided employer-based questions relevant to a specific company and/or industry.” Both Harris and 6 had a better understanding of not only what services were offered but how these activities enhanced students career prospects and development.
The career counselors shared that they did not know of specific services for African American students, in general, or African American men, in particular. Paula stated, “I am not aware of any services for males in general, as we offer broad aspects, but in working with an African American student in the past he did not understand how to ask for assistance, or who to reach out to for assistance.” Paula also acknowledged that more awareness and outreach needs to happen amongst this group of students to provide knowledge around the resources available to them. In referencing the need to engage African American men, Francis shared, “it’s hard to try and convince them to come and see us, but maybe after a failure they will be more willing to come check in.” I followed up inquiring if a student does not “fail,” what can be done to engage them in an effective way and they responded, “they need to be more strategic marketers and academia is not good at that.” They also shared that their general rule of practice in which they use with all students is to “probe” them with questions to gain a better understanding of how to assist.

In reviewing Career Services marketing materials, there have not been specific outreach efforts to engage specific student populations or groups including African American men. Based on the career counselor interviews, it was confirmed that the Career Services office offers services that benefit the general student population, but no specific services targeting African American men.

Theme 2: Reluctance to Engage with Career Services

In addition to a perceived lack of knowledge amongst the students, participants were also reluctant to engage with Career Services. For instance, Jake, who eventually worked in the career office, shared a story of how their grandmother taught them before applying for a job to be sure
and review the potential department, office, group, in which you will be working with to gain better insight on the environment you will be exposed. They shared how they used this approach with the career services office and “noticing that there were no Black male career counselors, or Black counselors in general.” The lack of diversity of counselors played a huge role in their perception on how the career center could assist them. Their motivation to gain an advantage in the job market for internships propelled them to still pursue engagement with the office, but they mentioned “even when I would obtain assistance from a career counselor, I would meet with one of the only two Black staff members to gain their feedback since they have experienced what I may go through.”

During the focus group, two participants who gained work experience within the career services office mentioned prior to working in the office their perception was like the other students. They, too, believed the career services office did not provide the services that would benefit them. Harris shared, “staff provides assessments and career counselors provide information, but students still leave with the same level of anxiety they came in with.” Even upon working within the career services office Jake felt there was “still a disconnect with the expectations career services has for students.” They highlighted the usefulness of the career portal (Handshake) and the available resources within the platform. While also mentioning there being a disconnect given the responsibilities of just being a student and how the career services office does not understand that “the average student is not going to be able to take advantage of these opportunities.” Despite working within the career center, Jake shared his friends “would not even go the career center and they would be like, ‘What are they going to do for me? Like the jobs I want, they are not even looking for people like me.’”
Paul, who had never been to the career services office, shared that even though they were aware of some of the services offered “the ability of career services to assist students in narrowing down their choices instead of mass communications will be helpful and increase our willingness to engage.” They pointed out that the broad marketing left them feeling a bit overwhelmed as to which services they should utilize, why they should utilize these services and who to contact. This contributed to their reliance on individuals they were already familiar with such as family, friends, peers and faculty members when needing things such as resume feedback. When asked if they were aware that the career services office offered resume assistance they replied “yes I am aware, but I wasn’t sure who to reach out to because when I received those emails there was never a name, it just listed a general email box.” They also shared, “I knew my family, friends or faculty mentor would get back to me quick. So I used them instead.” While students were aware that the career services offered feedback on resumes, students were reluctant to use these services because they did not know if they would receive timely feedback, which counselor to reach out to, or if it would be specific for their career interests.

In discussing their engagement with career services and the campus community overall, Terry shared,

It is crazy for two years I had one pod of friends that were Black and then I had another pod of friends are White, another one that were Hispanic. So I was like alternating and the only group where I felt like I was alright was with my Black friends because we understood the same things. I think we all kind of came to a consensus that we came to an HSI or PW1, whatever you want to call it, for opportunity, but the lack of representation is what we did not like.

In discussing their overall experience working on campus, Terry stated,

Every internship supervisor I had has either been White or Hispanic, and that also makes it really hard because I had to code switch the whole time working and like I cannot be
myself, you know, like I have to act a certain way, or talk a certain way, and that just gets exhausting.

While it sounds like the on-campus experience itself would be beneficial from a knowledge perspective, it seemed as though the career development aspect was hindered due to not being able to be authentic. This same “code switching” aspect would be prevalent when engaging with a career counselor who does not identify as African American, or as an African American man.

Negative campus experiences influenced students desire and reluctancy to engage with Career Services. During an individual interview with Jeff, they believed that African American men were:

More likely or inclined to speak with Black professionals then speaking with anyone else, so like an older White woman or an older White man, and while they are professionals. And I respect them highly, it is just we as Black people are more inclined to speak to people who look like us, who we strive to be. We are like oh, so and so is doing that, so I would love to work in that field, or I would love to learn from them or grab something from them, you know. Honestly, for me there is not a current counselor that looks like me and so I don’t think they would understand the same struggles that I do or the same concerns that I have about entering the career field of my choice.

Other than the students’ desire to engage with others whom they feel comfortable with based on ethnic origin, there is also a sense of inclusiveness they feel is lacking in the career services office.

Career counselors provided insights into their perceptions of why African American men do not engage with the career services office. Paula stated “we do not have any specific programming and the student I worked with in the past did not understand how to ask for help.” Francis supplemented that statement with:

they do not see individuals like themselves in support roles and that creates a barrier to their willingness to engage with us. Also, I don’t know if some know why they are here, which makes it even more difficult of knowing who to engage.

Meredith mentioned:
Well, it could be finding mentors or people that they can relate to. I could see how that could be a barrier because we do tend to gravitate towards people that we feel that connection with so having access to those mentors and those coaches, they build a connection with as well to help them along with the process. So it seems like they could feel, maybe disconnected to the Career Development Center (career services) or to other resources on campus. This could cause a further divide, so if they’re not engaged, then they may not be aware of the resources that are available for them as well.

There seems to be two underlying issues with one being students are not receptive to engaging with individuals who they do not feel can relate to their needs and experience. This has attributed to their unwillingness to seek out career services. The second, these students do not understand how the services can benefit them due to the specific needs they have now. The information they receive from career services does not resonate with them.

**Theme 3: Lack of Knowledge of Career Development Needs**

The ability to assist students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds is partially dependent upon an individual’s knowledge of what their career development process and workforce transition entails. Student’s knowledge of the available resources can contribute to their career development and progress towards their career goals. Jake expressed one of the challenges that African American men faced was “how to navigate the job market because there are stigmas attached to Black men in society that impede their progress in the job market.” They continued, “navigating job experiences across different ethnicities is different, so the career advice an Anglo student will receive will benefit them different than the career advice an African American student would receive.” They go on to share “the career center needs to understand that the job process is different for people who look different.”

The career platform (Handshake) was mentioned during the focus group. Most students were unfamiliar with the platform. Frank stated “I thought it was just for on-campus jobs.” Chris
who also has been employed on campus commented “I found all of my jobs through friends or other students who I saw working on campus by just asking how they got the job.” Students seemed unaware of the full range of options and resources available on Handshake such as full-time jobs postings, internships, and employer events held off campus. Handshake was also used to promote career events such as career fairs, workshops, information session, etc. The platform itself is a generalized resource for all students and employers to utilize, so there are no specific components related to African American men within the platform. If students do not utilize the platform, they are liable to miss out on the career development opportunities the platform presents.

The career counselors were asked the question: “what challenges and/or barriers to success are you aware of regarding students that are African American men on college campuses?” Career counselors discussed the lack of experience and information about meeting the career development needs of African American me. Paula shared:

I feel there are more stigma’s associated to African American males in the career field then there are to Hispanic and White students, especially in this area [of the country]. Unfortunately, I do not have a lot of specific knowledge in this area, as I have only worked with one African American student.

Francis highlighted a challenge, which was echoed by students, regarding diversity of faculty and staff on campus. They shared:

[African American men are] looking at people who don’t necessarily have the same background. Nor look like they do so I think it’s harder to relate. If you don’t see people in faculty positions or career counselor positions, then you make assumptions about well, they have no idea where I’m coming from, and rightfully so, we don’t. So, I think that probably could contribute to why they might not take the time to go meet with them [career counselors].
Francis highlighted a common challenge for students in seeking services related to the career counselors being able to identify with them. The ethnic and gender barriers the students felt directly influenced their willingness to engage.

Meredith shared similar insights regarding perceptions of the barriers and challenges for African American men in seeking career services support. They stated:

I could see how finding mentors or people that they [African American men] can relate to could be a barrier because we do tend to gravitate towards people that we feel that connection with so having access to those mentors and those coaches to build a connection with as well to help them along with the process. It seems like they could feel, maybe disconnected to the Career Development Center or to other resources on campus. This which the divide could become further, so if they are not engaged, then they may not be aware of the resources that are available for them as well.

Two of the career counselors highlighted the importance of students being able to relate to staff as a potential barrier to success and their engagement with the career services office.

While the career counselors were able to identify the lack of relatability as being a barrier for African American men, which contributes to their lack of engagement, there was a consensus that there was no specific career development strategy they used for these students. Also, there was no specific programming or services focused on African American men. Based on the information shared there was acknowledgement of there being some challenges, but they were not well versed on what most of those challenges entailed due to the lack of engagement with this specific group.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how Career Services supported African American men in their career development. The overarching conclusions from this study were:
1. There was a lack of awareness and trust from the students on how career services can assist them.

2. There was a reluctance to engage with the career services office due to the perception of the career counselor’s inability to relate.

3. There was a lack of knowledge amongst the career counselors regarding the challenges African American men face in pursuing their career goals.

The following will discuss these findings and implications further.

First, there was a lack of awareness from the students on the holistic aspect of what career services does and how those activities could assist them in their career development. Falconer & Hays (2006) found that students from underrepresented groups were less likely to utilize career services at their institutions and tended to be more unaware that such services exist. Findings from this study indicated that most students in this study lack of knowledge regarding how the activities of the career services department benefit them in their career progression.

Even those students who had previous experience with having their resume reviewed or participated in mock interviews were not convinced the career services office could help them further in their career development. With the repetitions of these specific activities having taken place outside of the career services office, the students felt they had advanced past the stage in which the career services office could assist with these career development components. They believed the knowledge and skill set they obtained was sufficient. Specifically, they did not understand how career counselors could help them or customize their advice based upon the students’ career interests and program of study.

Due to the limited knowledge the students had regarding career services and their acquired career development skills through other means, it propelled them to have a negative
attitude towards the department. Drawing upon SCCT, it is important for students to understand how their decision-making process is impacted by their feelings related to the process itself (Blustein et al., 1997). Students’ feelings that the career counselors might not be able to support them was substantiated a bit by the Career Counselors themselves. The Career counselors indicated that they did not have any specific career development strategies to support the career development of African American men.

Also, career services do not offer any specific services and/or activities for African American men. The primary services offered by the Career Services office were resume reviews, mock interviews, and job search assistance. The inability of the career services office to tailor their marketing efforts to the needs of this specific group creates a barrier that contributes to a further divide with African American men.

When considering the career development phase during the college-to-career transition, it is vital to the success of African American men’s to have access to the workforce and information about the workforce (Hamilton, 2005). Career counselors are often in positions that can help students gain both access and information about the workforce. Career counselors in this study mentioned “probing,” which was simply asking questions about the student and their interests, as their primary career development strategy. This method was used with every student regardless of ethnicity or gender. Career counselors seem to be aware that there needed to be more outreach and support of African American men but also did not know how best to succeed in this initiative. Moreover, the services, activities, and marketing materials were general in nature catering to the general student population. There was not specific outreach or services for particular groups of students, including African American men. Participants indicated that because of the general nature of information and services they did not see how the center could
help them. Thus, there was minimal engagement with the career services office. A potential implication is that African American men are not getting the necessary support they need in accessing the workforce post-graduation.

For those participants who had some basic knowledge of career services, there was a reluctance to engage based on their confusion as to who to contact and the benefit of engaging with the career services office. During the interviews, multiple students asked the question “what can career services do for me?” This issue of awareness was also compounded by the fact most of these students were first generation students. Previous literature has suggested that first-generation students often lack knowledge pertaining to the career development process (Tate et al., 2015). There are several potential consequences for African American men not being aware of career development resources. They might miss out on important information on how to advance their own careers post-college. Critical components of success for colleges are to create and foster environments that are advantageous for learning in the career development aspect (Williams, 2017).

The marketing strategy of the career services office was also problematic for the students due to the generalized perception of events and activities. More than half of the students mentioned the marketing being too broad in nature and not feeling it was applicable to what they need. The career counselors supported this statement by highlighting that there were no specific marketing efforts targeting African American men or any males across other ethnic groups. These marketing shortfalls may also have been the result of the lack of knowledge pertaining to the challenges and barriers African American men face. Not being able to connect with this group of students directly influences their lack of involvement in the events and activities hosted by the career services office.
Participants indicated that they did not “see” themselves in either the marketing materials for career services or in the staff themselves. The broad marketing of activities and programming did not provide a sense of inclusion amongst the students. According to Lent (2013) these “environmental” factors both within the career services department and associated marketing played an influential role in the students seeking assistance elsewhere with other individuals in which they felt more comfortable. Participants believed that their career journey would be different than their White or Hispanic peers.

Additionally, students were concerned career counselors would not be able to relate to them and their needs. There was concern that counselors did not understand the challenges Black men go through in their career journeys. Barker & Avery (2012) stated Black male students need to “build relationships, gain academic footing, and increase their level of institutional engagement” (p. 82) by interacting with other Black male students, faculty, staff. Drawing upon the SCCT model and the student behavior aspect (Lent, 2013), students gained relevant experience with several services associated with the career services office using external means, which enabled them to possess the belief they did not need the career services office. Environmental factors such as lack of representation in the marketing and the career counselor’s lack of relatability only increased the students disinterest to engage. Also, with the career development knowledge the student’s gained without engaging with career services; they had a belief their current skills were adequate to achieve the career goals.

Campus-based employment has been positively correlated with skills development and retention for students (Bluml, 2019). Being able to work on campus allows students to further integrate themselves in the campus environment and network with peers and professionals. Three students discussed being able to obtain employment on campus through the career portal
“Handshake.” However, most of the students were unfamiliar with how the career portal could help them in their career development journeys including finding on-campus employment. Other students who were employed on campus acquired their on-campus job through friends or asking others that currently occupied those roles.

While interviewing the career counselors it was shared that they acknowledge the need to be more proactive with this particular group of students due to their lack of engagement with the office. Also, possibly creating some sort of survey to obtain more knowledge on what their needs are, so they are able to provide the appropriate services. The intentionality that they described would be a good start to seeming more inclusive and conscious of learning the needs of African American men.

Recommendations

Based on the information obtained during the interviews as to the disconnect between African American men and the Career Services office here are my recommendations to improve this relationship.

Recommendation 1: Diversity and Culturally Responsive Professional Development

The counselors expressed a desire and need for more professional development training related to meeting the career development needs of African American men. This professional development needs to be structured trainings for career counselors throughout the academic year on the challenges and barriers African American men face when transitioning into a post-secondary environment. This training should encompass information about issues African American men face, societal issues, workforce issues, and support issues related to family, peers
and professionals. This could also entail partnering with specific organizations and groups both on and off campus who cater to African American men to learn more about the support mechanisms they utilize. This could potentially have a positive impact on the environmental components that influence student behaviors in creating this culture of support that engages them in an intentional manner.

**Recommendation 2: Increased Diversification of Career Development Staff**

The career services office needs to review its staffing demographic to ensure it is reflective of the students in which they serve. There are no African American career counselors on the staff, which has been identified as a barrier to student engagement. Concerted efforts need to be made to partner with the Human Resources office on developing strategic recruitment efforts aimed at African American candidates and African American men. That should include, but not be limited to advertising full-time positions at HBCU’s, Black periodicals, Black professional organizations, diversity recruitment agencies and other web entities, etc. Creating inclusive environments where students can see themselves in certain occupations based on individuals they relate to occupying these roles only increases their level of self-efficacy. Having conversations with individuals that they can relate to within roles such as the career counselor position and share experiences, provides necessary reinforcement around expectations and increased knowledge.

**Recommendation 3: Proactive Outreach**

Career counselors should adopt a strategy on how they will engage and reach out to African American men on campus. This will assist in breaking down the barrier of relatability by
highlighting activities and guidance that are applicable to these students. Partnering with student organizations might be one way to outreach to African American men. Creating content that would be relevant to African American men such as customized mentorship opportunities with other African American men both inside and outside of the institution. Also, possibly hosting a career development summit or event specifically for this group of students in which they can engage with professionals they can relate to from both an ethnic and gender perspective. Incorporating these types of practices provides students with the opportunities they are missing that would increase their level of knowledge around the career development process and positively influence their perceptions of career services.

**Recommendation 4: Strategic Marketing**

There needs to be an evaluation of the marketing communications that are shared across campus to make it more relevant and inclusive of African American men. Possibly, a focus group for African American men to determine what their needs are and how best to ensure the department is equipped to assist with those needs. An evaluation of how Handshake is promoted and being more detailed in its resources and benefits to this group of students. Also, the communication to students needs to be more intentional in highlighting specific services that are available based on the students’ classification or program of study. And also, the benefits of those services.

**Recommendation 5: Engage Professional Organizations**

Professional organizations such as the National Association of College and Employers (NACE) and even the Southern Association of Colleges & Employers (SoACE) create basic
principles and guidelines around career development. The career services office should seek more information pertaining to the support of African American men as well as minorities in general. With their being a lot of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts put forth by these organizations, it would be advantageous to seek assistance with the issues surrounding the need to better support African American men on campus. With the advanced networks these organizations have, it would also provide an opportunity to connect with other career services offices who may be experiencing similar issues around the engagement of African American men.

Conclusion

This research study supported previous research on the barriers and challenges associated with African American men, but also highlighted the disconnect between the Career Services office and their ability to support the career development of African American men. Students’ feelings of isolation, lack of relatability with career services, lack of knowledge and engagement by career service personnel all contributed to the disservice that is being done while these students are pursuing their education within a post-secondary environment. With some of the same challenges and barriers that existed decades ago still being prevalent in today shows how much more progress needs to be done. Student support office such as Career Services, who plays an integral role in the career development and success of students must be in the forefront of these efforts given the impact they can have on a student’s career progression.
CHAPTER 3
REFLECTION

During the initial onset of my research of practice my goal was to analyze the relationship between career services and African American men. Gain more insight into the perceptions of career services from the African American male prospective and assess what benefits, challenges, and opportunities there were for this specific group of students pertaining to career services. Also, I sought to uncover how career services personnel, more specifically career counselors engage and interact with this specific group of students. Being in the career services profession, I have seen the lack of engagement from both parties, so to be able to analyze “why” was important to changing this narrative. I thought back to my own undergraduate experience and how I felt due to the lack of engagement from student services personnel from career services, academic advising, and other units. To see some of these same practices today has been disheartening, so I was motivated to conduct this study and produce some viable data that could support the need for change.

For my study I was able to recruit both student participants and career services personnel to take part in my research. In the beginning the part I struggled with the most was finding previous research on the relationship between career services and African American men, which turned out to be minimal. The studies on barriers and success of African Americans and African American men in higher education has been well documented and even the value of career services to students overall. The missing piece was the intersection of career services and African American men, so while it was challenging to find previous research, it made my research feel that much more important. Based on my own educational experiences I saw first-
hand the lack of support, so to be able to support the claim with substantive research was very fulfilling, as I feel this research can jump start some meaningful conversations within the career development space. Also, being that the study took place at a predominantly Hispanic institution where they are supposed to be minority serving, the same problems persist. The one interesting fact about this institution was that the executive leadership was mostly White, so I wonder if that also played a factor in the lack of support for a specific minority group, as most of the previous research regarding the African American experience focuses on predominantly White institutions.

I focused on the students in the early part of the research because I felt it was critical to get their feedback on what the relationship was and that would assist me in formulating some additional questions for the career counselors. That strategy worked well, as I was able to take some of the information from the students and create additional dialogue for the career counselors that I initially did not consider. During the process I used both a focus group and semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The focus group proved to be very beneficial, as it provided an opportunity for the students to have an open discussion and share some of the things they have experienced. Some of the information and feelings shared was not only isolated to one person, but experienced amongst others. This made the conversation even more insightful and engaging, as it brought out some authentic thoughts where the students sometimes feel they cannot exhibit in certain environments.

The data analysis portion wasn’t complicated, but more so challenging in that I was not sure how best to organize the data I was able to gather. In searching for varying tools to assist, I found software that could organize it and allow me to code, but to learn how to use the software took some time. I decided to use a matrix style organization tool, which proved to be easier to
use when separating data into categories. The themes that emerged from the students was quite prevalent, which I initially figured would be much more difficult. I did not want to establish my own themes, as I wanted to avoid having with biased opinions on what I think the students will say. What was useful was already knowing some of the barriers, issues or concerns that students experienced, so when they shared those details, I could easily create the themes. The sorting process afterwards became a bit frustrating because some of the information the students shared fit into multiple themes, so trying to decide which one became tedious. Overall, I would not say that any part of the process was undelightful, as the entire experience was positive and the interactions with the participants were truthful, which brought even more validity to my findings.

If I could go back and redo some things, one would be to get more student participants to expand even further on what this relationship looks like and even add more questions to gain more in-depth insight into “why” behind the disconnect of these two groups. Also, since all the students were upperclassmen, I would have been more strategic to intentionally recruit more sophomores for the study. I think gaining their perspective would have provided even more insight into the relationship between African American students and career services. Since sophomores are still early on in their educational experience, I am sure some of their feedback would be different than the juniors and seniors. I would also expand the research to other institutions throughout the state under the same classification, as I feel this would add another aspect to the conversation regarding the ethnic makeup of leadership at all the institutions. Typically, the make-up at predominately White institutions are White males, but is that same structure in place at Hispanic serving institution as well?

One of the things I was surprised was the drive demonstrated by these students despite the barriers they identified. I was not expecting the level of resilience they demonstrated in
pursuit of their goals. Most of them all knew exactly what they wanted to do career wise, but had to navigate their way through trial and error in order to get closer to reaching their goals. From networking improperly to unknowingly keeping themselves from useful resources, they seemed to find ways to progress and gain the necessary experience that would help them to be successful. With most of these students being first-generation, each of their paths were quite different, but possessed commonalities. While they all had individuals who doubted them they found spaces of support whether it was friends, faculty or community members. I truly admired their character and willingness to share their journeys without any regrets.

My plan is to apply some of the things that I have learned to enhance the effectiveness of the career services office and create an action plan on how to properly engage African American men on campus. I want to conduct more focus groups and use the research I have conducted to drive more conversation around support for African American men, but be more intentional in analyzing what specific departments are doing and not just look at the institution in a broad manner as I have seen in a lot of previous research. I feel students have a lot to say and their voices go unheard by leadership too many times and we lose valuable information that can improve their educational experience overall.

I would also like to work with the career counselors on establishing spaces to have meaningful dialogue to address some of the gaps in service to make sure the career services office is properly serving African American men. Also, seeking out webinars and various training opportunities that will provide the necessary context on what success looks like for African American men and what needs to be done to support their educational journey. Based on my research there is an awareness gap in the professional for non-minorities that needs to be addressed. Rather than making the acquisition of knowledge around how best to serve African
American men an option we should be making it mandatory to be well versed on serving
minorities altogether. More research around this topic is necessary and I feel I have contributed
to an area that need attention.
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APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOLS
Focus Group Protocols

Purpose: to obtain participant feedback on their career development and success and what role career services plays in that process.

Introduction:

1. Welcome participants and thank them for their participation.
2. Introduce myself and the purpose of this research.
3. Participant introductions.
4. Provide consent form(s) and offer copies for participants.
5. Provide name tags for participants.
6. Give overview of structure and guidelines of focus group (i.e., confidentiality, honesty, recording, etc.).

Guidelines:

1. Do not share participant names or information with anyone outside of the focus group.
2. Focus group is voluntary and participants can leave at any time.
3. Be respectful of all participants and allow everyone to share their thoughts.
4. There will be 10-minute breaks every hour until the interviews have concluded, but participants can take a break at any time, if necessary.
5. Prior to wrap-up, I will ask if there is anything else the participants would like to share.

Interview Questions:

a. Provide your name, major and classification (class year).
b. Describe your career goals?
c. Describe what steps are you taking to achieve your career goals?
d. Describe what challenges have you encountered in pursuing your career goals?

Perceptions Career Services Office

a. Provide some details on your familiarity with the Career Services Office?
b. Describe your perception of Career Services staff?
c. Provide some insight on your experiences working with Career Services staff?

Services Used

a. Tell us what services have you used at Career Services?
b. Tell us how these services helped you achieve your career goals?

Supporting African American Men
a. How might Career Services better support the career development of African American men?

b. What types of programs would you like to see to support the career development of African American Men?

Wrap up

Thank you for participating. Please let me know if you have any additional questions or comments.
APPENDIX B

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS
Individual Interview Protocols
Career Counselors

Purpose: to obtain participant feedback on what career development strategies they utilize while working with students and specifically with African American men.

Introduction:
1. Welcome participant and thank them for their participation.
2. Introduce myself and the purpose of this research.
3. Participant introduction.
4. Provide consent form(s) and offer copy for participant.
5. Give overview of structure and guidelines of interview (i.e., confidentiality, honesty, recording, etc.).

Interview Questions –

a. Provide your name, ethnicity, and job title?
b. Provide details on which academic college do you work with?
c. Provide your opinion on the impact Career Services has on the academic and career success of students that are African American students?
d. Describe what challenges and/or barriers to success you are aware of regarding for students that are African American men on college campuses?
e. Describe what programs and/or resources does the Career Services office offer for African American students and men.
f. Provide us details on your career development strategy?
g. Specifically, for students that are African American men?

Additional questions:

a. What tools do you use for students to identify their strengths? When they wish to pursue a career outside of those strengths, what is your strategy on advising them?
b. In what ways do you engage students who are not aware of the services you offer? Follow-up: if a student already has a resume and been on several job interviews and does not feel career services can assist them, what would be your strategy in engaging with that student?
c. Is there any particular strategy that you use to promote the services you provide to students to be more specific to their needs? Ex. Resume reviews or mock interviews specific to a major – Engineering, Marketing, Computer Science.

Wrap up

a. Are there any questions you have for me?
b. Share that they will receive a copy of the transcript and might be contacted for follow up questions.
c. Thank them for participating.