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The University of San Francisco

DEMYSTIFYING SUCCESS: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN  
CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ABOUT FACTORS LEADING  
TO SCHOLASTIC SUCCESS DURING THE FIRST YEAR

A Dissertation Presented  
to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

By  
Robert L. Snowden Jr.  
San Francisco, California  
May 2009

THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO  
Dissertation Abstract

Demystifying Success: Critical Reflections of African-American California Community College Sophomores About Factors Leading to Their Academic Success During the First Year

To date a noteworthy amount of research has been conducted on African American student success strategies and the first year experience of college students independently. Researchers including Vincent Tinto (1987), Randi Levitz and Lee Noel (1989), Corinna Ethington (1990), and Shaun Harper (2006), have each explored the issue of student departure at the university level and the success of African American students in higher education separately.

What remained to be explored were the critical reflections and experiences of first year African American California community college students about their persistence, progress towards degree/certificate completion, transfer preparation and their use of student services resources. The purpose of my study was to explore the experiences of African American community college freshmen in an attempt to improve institutional approaches to African American student success. My study utilized analysis of the narrative to explore the critical reflections of six African American community college students about their successful transition from the first-year to the second-year of college. Critical Race Theory was applied as a theoretical lens in reference to understanding the historically unequal circumstances African American students have faced over the history of the American educational system.

The findings from this study indicate that personal connections African American students make with college faculty are critical elements to academic success. Therefore institutions should encourage faculty to make themselves available to students by

becoming active as advisors for student clubs or mentoring students within the instructor's discipline. It's also recommended that African American faculty increase their visibility on campus and utilize the social capital they hold with African American students as a tool for motivation. Lastly, the findings reveal that future African American students would benefit from becoming involved in co-curricular activities early in their academic career and creating connections with second and third year students to further acculturate themselves to the institution.

This dissertation proposal, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the school of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

<u>Robert L. Snowden, Jr.</u>	<u>5/5/09</u>
Candidate	Date

Dissertation Committee

<u>Dr. Betty Taylor</u>	<u>6/9/09</u>
Chairperson	Date

<u>Dr. Emma Fuentes</u>	<u>5/5/09</u>
	Date

<u>Dr. Patricia A. Mitchell</u>	<u>5/5/09</u>
	Date

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my amazing and supportive family. Mom, without your uncompromising love I would have never made it through my undergraduate experience. You have always been my partner in this journey and this degree is as much yours as it is mine. Aunt Carolyn and Grandma Lelia the two of you have been in my corner from the day I was born, everything you have ever done to help me along has been appreciated and I can't begin to thank you enough. This dissertation is also dedicated to all of my aunts, uncles, cousins and siblings. I know I've been busy for the last decade but now I can finally make those summer barbeques and birthday parties. And to Michele, your genius has inspired me throughout this entire process. You had faith in me, even when I did not; you will always be my rock and thank you helping me cross these burning sands. To everyone not mentioned by name that has been a part of my life throughout this journey thank you and I appreciate you all.

Lastly, this dissertation is dedicated to my father, Dr. Robert L. Snowden. I would like to thank you for giving the inspiration to set and achieve my goals and for blessing me with your infinite wisdom. You have taught me how to be a scholar, a gentleman and an educator. You have shown me the values of commitment, sacrifice and patience. Most importantly you have taught me the value of family and love. You are the most amazing man I have ever met in my life and I can't thank you enough for being my dad.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
List of Tables.....	viii
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Background and Need.....	6
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Research Questions.....	9
Theoretical Framework.....	9
Delimitations.....	14
Limitations.....	14
Significance of the Study.....	15
Definition of Terms.....	18
Summary.....	19
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	
Introduction.....	21
The First Year Experience.....	21
Pre-enrollment Factors.....	22
Tinto’s Model of Student Departure.....	26
Freshman Transition Process.....	27
Orientating Students to College Life.....	27
Cultural Influence During the First Year of College.....	29
Issues Facing African American Students in Higher Education.....	29
Summary.....	32
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY	
Introduction.....	35
Research Design.....	35
Research Setting.....	37
Population and Sample.....	38
Instrumentation.....	39
Data Collection.....	42
Data Analysis.....	43
Protection of Human Subjects.....	43



Portrait of the Researcher.....	44
 CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY	
Introduction.....	47
Profiles of the Participants .....	48
Findings.....	52
Research Question #1: What Factors Led to the Persistence of African American Students During Their First Year at a California Community College?.....	52
Making Personal Connections With College Faculty .....	52
Research Question # 2: Have College Generated Programs or Services Impacted the Success of African American Students During the First Year at a California Community College?.....	61
Research Question #3: What Recommendations Do Current African American Students Have For the Institution and Future African American First Year California Community College Students?.....	63
Institutional Recommendations.....	64
Social Integration with the Campus Culture.....	67
Developing a Personal Relationship With Your Professor....	67
Summary.....	69
 CHAPTER V: DISSCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
Introduction.....	70
Discussion.....	72
Conclusions.....	82
Recommendations.....	83
Recommendations for Future Research .....	83
Recommendations Professional Practice.....	84
Summary.....	86
Reflections of the Researcher.....	86
 References.....	 88
 APPENDIX A.....	 94
IRBPHS Initial Application.....	95
 APPENDIX B.....	 101
Los Rios Community College District Research Approval Letter .....	102
 APPENDIX C.....	 103
Student Invitation Letter.....	104
 APPENDIX D.....	 105
Letter to College Faculty.....	106

APPENDIX E.....	107
Release Forms for Tapes and Transcripts.....	108
APPENDIX F.....	109
Interview Protocol - Dialogue Questions.....	110
APPENDIX G.....	112
Informed Consent Letter.....	113
APPENDIX H.....	115
Demographic Questionnaire.....	116

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Racial and Ethnic Breakdown Percentages for Overall Student Population.....	4
2. Age of Students at Enrollment.....	4
3. Gender of Students at Enrollment.....	5
4. Demographics Data of the Student Participants.....	47

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of the Problem

The opportunity to earn a proper education is of extreme importance to the advancement of African Americans in the United States (Woodson, 1933). It's unfortunate that the education system over the course of U.S. history has systematically denied equal access in education for African Americans, thus leaving this population historically disadvantaged in respect to access to basic skills and higher education opportunities (Tatum, 2007). Over seventy years ago Woodson (1933) expressed concerns about this phenomenon and the consequences of a dominant group having control over how knowledge is distributed within a society. He argues that the systematic denial of access of equal education between African Americans and Whites has empowered the dominant group in this country with the ability to control the thinking and aspirations of generations of African Americans. He explains,

If you can control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you don not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a person feel that he/she is inferior, you do not have to compel him/her to accept an inferior status, he/she will seek for it. If you make a person think that he/she is justly outcast, you don't have to order that person to the back door, that person will go without being told and if there is no back door, the very nature of that person will demand one. (p.iii)

As a result of the continuous unequal and biased education practices in this country, there is a long-standing connection between African American's and a lack of adequate preparedness for higher education (Bennett, 1993).

Minority students in general and African American students specifically are a segment of the California's population that is particularly challenged in matriculating in

to higher education from the states K-12 system. According to the California Department of Education High School Exit Exam Office (2008), African American students earned the lowest passing percentage in both math and English of any student population in the state. Systematically, high percentages of African American students have failed to achieve basic skills competencies in school thus leading to a direct correlation to the dismal numbers of African American students that arrive at colleges and universities each fall ill-equipped for academic success (Hirsch, 2006).

The issues facing the education of students of color in the state of California are vast and without intervention the percentage of African American students that fail to succeed in higher education courses will continue to rise. In the state of California the increasing minority population is eventually going to force a variety of institutions including state government, K-12 education and colleges and universities to address the problems associated with low performing students of color (Harper and Wolley, 2002).

The low percentages of formally educated or vocationally trained African Americans are having a direct and significant impact on diversity in the workplace and in the classroom. Based on data in the Community College League of California report (2008), the California Community College system currently serves the most diverse population in its history. While the minority population continues to grow the African American students navigating the community college system are facing overwhelming social and academic challenges and are consequently failing to achieve proportionate graduation and transfers rates compared to other populations statewide (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2007).

There are a variety of challenges facing institutions that both in theory and practice seek to establish equity between marginalized populations without limiting the opportunities for other groups. As the California community college system continues to grow, steps must be taken to institutionalize methods that consistently address issues associated with educating a diverse student body. These issues include the low performing rates of marginalized student populations and the lack of cultural understanding that can develop from a lack of diversity in classrooms. Despite the fact the California community college system has been a valued part of the collegial matriculation process for millions of students, yet with fewer and fewer African Americans successfully navigating the system, current negative persistence and matriculation trends will undoubtedly continue.

To date a noteworthy amount of research has been conducted on African American student success strategies and the first year experience of college students independently. Researchers such as Vincent Tinto (1987), Randi Levitz and Lee Noel (1989), Corinna Ethington (1990), and Shaun Harper (2006), have each explored the issue of student departure at the university level and the success of African American students in higher education separately. They researchers have found that student engagement and student's feeling of connectedness to the institution are critical to the student's social development and academic success. Though numerous research projects have taken aim at solutions to this issue there continues to be areas of student barriers that should be studied and documented.

What remained to be explored in this area were the critical reflections and experiences of first year African American California community college students about

their persistence, progress towards degree/certificate completion, transfer preparation and their use of student services resources. This study explored the successful strategies that have lead to the persistence of African American students in the California community college system and is designed to serve as a resource for college administrators and faculty who wish to explore methods for affecting the growth and matriculation of African American students on their campuses. As the California community college system advances its efforts in improving the basic skills comprehension and career and technical training this study aligns directly with efforts to erase current trends in education that are perpetuating educational inequality among students of color.

The college chosen for this study is part of the Los Rios Community College District and is located in Northern California. According to the California Community Colleges System Office report (2007) the college serves over 18,000 students that reflect the diversity of a major metropolitan area. Table 1 describes the racial and ethnic student population at the selected institution, Table 2 describes the age range of the colleges' student population and Table 3 serves as a description of the gender breakdown of the campus. In 2005, 14.7 percent of the student body was African American, 22.2 percent was Asian, 6 percent was Filipino, 31.4 percent identified as white while 14.8 percent identified as Hispanic. The remaining percentages of the student body were divided up as other non-white, Pacific Islander, Native American and those who declined to state. Additionally the students attended the college from all over the region and nearly 60% of the student population was under the age of 25. The College Research Office Report (2007) stated that nearly 60% of the student population is female and that the college is the most diverse among student's ethnicity within the Los Rios District.

Table 1

## Racial and Ethnic Breakdown Percentages for Overall Student Population

Racial or Ethnic Background	Overall School Population % (n=18,413)
Asian	22.2
Black African/American	14.7
Filipino	6.0
Hispanic	14.8
White	31.4
Native American	0.9
Pacific Islander	1.7
Other Non-White	2.5
Unknown/Decline to State	5.8

Table 2

## Age of Students at Enrollment

Age	Overall School Population % (n=18,413)
Under 18	3.1
18-24	53.8
25-49	36.8
Over 49	6.4
Unknown/Decline to State	0.0



Table 3  
Gender of Students at Enrollment

Gender	Overall School Population % (n=18,413)
Female	58.0
Male	41.0
Unknown/Decline to State	1.0

According to the same report, over 50% of the student population attend exclusively during the day while 25% attend exclusively during the evening. More than 20% of the students attend both day and evening, moreover nearly 30% of the student's reported that their household income is below the poverty level while nearly 70% of the student population is working either full or at least part time. In addition, more than 50% of the student population stated that their educational goal is to transfer to a four-year university and about 20% of students have an educational goal of obtaining an associates degree or certificate.

#### Background and Need for the Study

African Americans have aspired and achieved academically in spite of tremendous obstacles, yet have historically ranked lower than Whites in academic achievement. This disparity between the earned grade point averages and standardized test scores of African Americans or any other minority population and Whites in the United States is defined as the achievement gap (Hale, 2001). Though as a population African Americans have made significant gains in academics, gains have been made by other minority populations and over time these other groups have been successful in

improving their standing academically in comparison to Whites. African Americans are still marred by a significant disparity between their academic success and the academic accomplishments of Whites and other racial groups (Tatum, 2007). It's critical that educational institutions recognize the inequalities exists between African Americans and other student populations and make deliberate efforts to derail the historical legacy of under achievement and disproportionate success rates.

For many African American students' choosing to attend college is a monumental decision that can lead to substantive change in their current and future lifestyles. If these students have been victims of the inequalities perpetrated throughout k-12 systems then without intervention they are more likely to struggle academically and socially in institutions of higher education. This dissertation examines specifically the experiences of African American students at a Northern California community college that have successfully completed their first year of courses in an effort to gain insight and provide new strategies in promoting African American student success.

Though the college selected for this dissertation has consistently provided excellent service to the community it still has identified areas for improvement. The California Community Colleges System Office (2007) reports that the college is facing challenges in the area of student academic success and matriculation. The report also highlighted that the college is specifically lacking in support mechanisms that would better serve a multicultural population of first year students from urban areas within the area of basic skills. For the purpose of this dissertation basic learning skills has been defined as competency in college level English and college level mathematics courses. Do to the fact basic skills mastery is a requirement for all degree programs at the college

and are a cornerstone of the learning process it is imperative that the college investigate applicable solutions in improving the overall success of a substantial percentage of its student population.

This dissertation's value is in its focus on a segment of the community college student body that has been identified by this institution and the state of California as suffering from poor matriculation and persistence rates (California Community Colleges System Office, 2007). The data gathered by the researcher from the reflections of these students is designed to lead to overall efforts to enhance the retention and matriculation of African American college freshman by informing faculty, staff and administrators of student perspectives in relation to their own education. It is this researcher's intent to provide data to support innovative approaches to institutionalizing improvements for the Academic progress of African American students in higher education.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore through the reflections of students the factors that lead to African American community college freshman persistence. This dissertation: 1) examined college programs or services that were available to or utilized by the student during the first year and, 2) explored the recommendations of African American college sophomores for incoming African American first semester students. For the purpose of this dissertation student persistence was defined as continued attendance and unit completion from the semester of first enrollment through two consecutive semesters as a full time student according to number of units attempted and completed. Limiting the dissertation to a northern California urban/suburban community college expanded upon previous research on freshman success (Tinto, 1993), African

American college student success, and African American student in the California community college system.

### Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. What factors led to the persistence of African American students during their first year at a California community college?
2. Have college generated programs or services impacted the success of African American students during the first year at a California community college?
3. What recommendations do current African American students have for the institution and future African American first year California community college students?

### Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework applied to the reflections of African American first year students in this dissertation was Critical Race Theory. A Critical Race Theory framework underscores the point that race [still] matters when researching issues in the field of education (West, 1992). Critical Race Theory therefore is a fitting context to examine the experiences of African American students as they continue to struggle with matriculation and academic proficiency within the California's Community College system. Early writings on the topic of Critical Race Theory are linked to the writings of Derrick Bell (1993) and Alan Freeman in the mid-1970s (Delgado, 1995). Other writers have contributed to the body of knowledge relating to Critical Race Theory including Kimberlé W. Crenshaw (1995) and E. Nathaniel Gates (1997).

Critical Race Theory was not the first adaptation of Critical Theory; Critical Race Theory was born from a movement called Critical Legal Studies. Critical Legal Studies is a progressive legal movement that challenges modern legal practices and proposes that laws address people through social and cultural contexts (Gordon, 1999). Critical Legal Studies scholars are critical of how mainstream legal ideology and its portrayal of US society fails to include racism in its critique, thus establishing the grounds for the development of a restructured method of examining society, Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

According to Delgado (1995,p.xiv), racism is “normal, not aberrant, in American society”, because it is so engrained in our history, racism and the social construction of race are natural elements. Yet Critical Race Theory differs from critical legal studies in its ability to incorporate the voices of theorists and the subjects in a way that fosters a humanistic element to the research being conducted. The experiences of both the researcher and the subject create a context where a new analytical perspective about race is established. Not all theorist or scholars of Critical Race Theory hold the same views or apply the theory in the same method. Critical Race Theory has begun to gain exposure in the field of education particularly due to its use of the narrative in examining issues related to schools and learning, early Critical Race Theory scholars such as Patricia Williams (1991) and Derrick Bell (1987, 1992) added to the body of work associated with Critical Race Theory incorporating narrative analysis as a growing trend in qualitative research methods.

Critical Race Theory allows me as the researcher to analyze the social construction of race as a common experience of people of color in the United States.

Race and races are merely the products of ideas and relationships between human beings (Delgado & Stefancic 2001). The social construction of race is based on categories that are invented by society and can be manipulated when beneficial to the dominant culture. In addition to the social construction of race, Critical Race Theory addresses the concept of material determinism. Delgado and Stefancic state that, “Because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working class people (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it.” These exterior factors are extremely important when considering the social and psychological factors that are involved in the process of the higher education for African American students.

The United States has fostered over two hundred years of socially constructed racism towards African American people. That history of racism has had horrific effects on the academic success of students of color throughout this nations history (Green, 1989). Throughout the history of the United States, the federal government has been methodical in its attempt to remove from record numerous laws and practices based in Jim Crow legislation that continue to handicap black school children today. Sadly the roots of past racism are still prevalent in multiple aspects of North American society today (Delgado, 1995). Public education in the United States is the foundation upon which higher education rests and higher education has historically been a means to advance as a people within a society that provides more opportunity to people with formal training and education. Due to socioeconomic limitations, staggering illiteracy rates, and other socially constructed harms, many marginalized groups in the United States are caught within a crippling cycle of poverty and despair. As a result these

marginalized populations are not able to create the social capital needed to make advancements in the United States, due to the lack of a formal education foundation.

The African American community in the United States has measured below average in academic achievement for generations. Across state borders, time zones and socioeconomic status, black students in the United States are not reaching the same levels of academic success as non-black students, nor are they granted many of the same opportunities for academic enrichment as students that are non-black (Daniel and Armida 2004). This gap in academic success is fueled by decades of poor economic conditions, and partially through an educational system that still has a limited desire in teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Due to the staggering deficit that black students are facing because of ineffective schools; alternative strategies are being explored in an attempt to raise the academic success of these disadvantaged students.

Critical Race Theory is being implemented in some settings to help change how students, teachers, administrators and communities challenge themselves to make positive changes in the education of black students (Stovall 2004). I think that because of the intentional and unintentional racism present in schools across the United States, African American students and their communities have over time become desensitized to the importance of a quality education. This is particularly devastating to the African American community because, without the basic knowledge and social conditioning received while receiving a formal education; black people in the United States are being twice defeated. Additionally, by not receiving effective social and academic schooling, African American people are limited in their ability to break the lasting effects that slavery has had on this population (Young, Wright et al. 2005).

Stories and the voices of real people lend validity to issues in education that are complicated by the occasionally subtle and sometimes blatant undercurrent of race and racism in the United States. Critical Race researchers employ narratives as a means of establishing cohesion within a particular race group, and apply these stories as a method of demystifying the assumptions of the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical Race Theory allows the research participants to self identify their own reality, while providing a applicable framework to conduct analysis that can be used locally or generalized to larger segments of the population because of the fluid nature of the subject of race. The experiences of people allow critical race theorists to examine individuals within the context of their own socially constructed realities, rather than imposing a false or manufactured framework to apply their data. This serves as a powerful method of research and can be utilized as a method for exposing the dominant culture to the true nature of their actions on the group being studied.

Critical Race Theory also serves as a method of further understanding the social and psychological state of African American students in higher education. For many African American students, going to college creates a separation from community and family. This population of students is extremely sensitive to outside distractions and is continuously struggling to maintain an authentic connection to all matters that are genuine to their personal history (Hefner, 2004). Race, class and poverty each play parts in the ideological distribution of the material benefits afforded to people in society.

Moreover this distribution of benefits is directly linked to the opportunities and quality of education afforded to African American students especially in urban areas. Without recognition of the multifaceted means in which race dictates access in the United



States a study calling attention to African American students would be incomplete. Critical Race Theory as a framework allows for the researcher to include the population being studied, in the critical design of interventions set to assist them attain their scholastic goals. Moreover it allows for the consideration of authentic data in work committed to addressing the distinctive problems associated in society in education as identified by African American students.

#### Delimitations

This dissertation was conducted at one California community college. The students who were used as participants in the dissertation may differ from students at other community colleges or students of four-year universities. The sample was limited to students that were first time freshman during the fall semester of 2007, therefore students who entered prior to that semester or after that semester may have different experiences due to the fluctuating nature of campus culture and student populations. Additionally, the researcher attempted to recruit ten students for the dissertation and after they were initially self-selected four were disqualified from participating by not meeting predetermined criteria, thus allowing only six participants to contribute as participants in this dissertation.

#### Limitations

The nature of qualitative research is to gain a rich and personal account of the individual experiences of participants (Creswell, 2005). Therefore the personal experiences of these students may not be applicable to a larger group of first year students regionally or nationally. Moreover, students at the community college level may have different experiences than those students at a private or public four-year institution.

Additionally this community college serves a diverse population of over 18,000 students in a major metropolitan area and may not be relevant to rural or smaller colleges. Because only six students were selected for this dissertation from a first year population the results may not be accurately generalized for the entire freshman class including those students who are classified as part-time. Moreover it should be noted that the experiences of this student population could be affected by the college's efforts to assist first year students through district and statewide initiatives.

The researcher's position as an African American faculty member at the college used in this dissertation may have influenced the responses of the participants as they relate to reflecting candidly about college faculty members or administrators. Four of the six participants had previous co-curricular or social contact with the researcher before this dissertation. Therefore, the researcher acknowledges that the previous level of contact may have created an environment of familiarity for participants when responding to the interview questions.

### Significance of the Study

This dissertation examined the experiences of African American students at a California Community College who have successfully completed their first year of academic courses. This dissertation is significant because it focused on a segment of the community college student body that has been identified by the college as suffering from poor matriculation and persistence rates (California Community Colleges System Office, 2007). This researcher believes that the information gathered from the reflections of successful African American students' can lead to the overall enhancement of efforts to retain and support African American college freshmen. This research will serve the

campus by informing administrators of student perspectives in relation to their own education and subsequently motivating administrators and faculty to consider reasonable improvements to the current college infrastructure.

Though community colleges can serve as gateways to higher education, they can work to the benefit of four-year institutions by providing alternative options for students in times of over enrollment (Dowd, 2007). For many undergraduate students seeking a bachelor of arts degree, transferring from a community colleges presents an option for completing a their entire lower division course work before they apply and are admitted to the four-year institution. Despite a growing number of students enrolling in community colleges and the systems ability to assist in transfer to four-year institutions.

Current research supports the perception that the United States is facing a crisis in regards to the scholastic preparedness of African American students (Hefner, 2004). African American students specifically in the state of California continue to struggle in achieving their transfer goals and improving their rates of matriculation. Therefore it becomes critical that community colleges take a proactive role in supporting this marginalized population in the attainment of their educational goals.

An analysis of the narrative qualitative research approach allowed the students that were a part of this dissertation and opportunity to safely dialogue about their experiences in regards to successes and failures. Additionally this method of research afforded an opportunity for students to act as agents for change at their own institution.

It's my hope that this dissertation will eventually offer valuable recommendations on how the institution should provide programs and services to improve the first year experience specifically for African American students. Additionally this dissertation

showcases the practices of successful African American college students and focuses on proactive methods for producing a greater number of well-adjusted and academically competent African American students.

## Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this dissertation, the following terms were defined as follows:

*African American*: African American refers to people having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes people who indicated their race or races as "Black, African Am., or Negro" or wrote in entries such as African American, Afro American, Nigerian, or Haitian. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000)

*California community colleges*: Higher education system that is comprised of 72 districts and 110 colleges. Community colleges provide vocational training, basic academic skills education and preparation of students for transfer to four-year institutions in addition to offering opportunities for lifelong learning. (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2007).

*Campus services*: Campus services refer to support services available to assist students with career decision-making, problem resolution, and goal achievement. (Cosumnes River College Research Office Report, 2007)

*Critical Race Theory (CRT)*: Examines the effects racial prejudice, racial subordination and discrimination within educational institutions in the United States. (Bell, 1993; Delgado, 1995; West, 1992)

*Culture*: Culture refers to the shared experiences, symbols, values and beliefs of a particular population based on a wide variety of factors. (Banks & Banks, 2003)

*Persistence*: Persistence is defined as a student enrolling in a particular fall semester who enrolls in the subsequent spring semester. (Cosumnes River College Research Office Report, 2007)

*White*: White refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as "White" or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Near Easterner, Arab, or Polish. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000)

### Summary

The motivation for this dissertation was a deep concern for the current rates of matriculation and low academic performance of African American community college students. For those African American first time freshman entering the California community college system, much can be learned from the experiences of African American sophomore students who have successfully navigated through the first year of college. This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter I is comprised of background information supporting the overall need for this dissertation, the statement of the problem, research questions and theoretical framework.

The dissertation's limitations and delimitations are also discussed in chapter I. Chapter II contains a review of significant literature and establishes a theoretical foundation for comprehending the dissertation's findings. Chapter III contains an explanation of the methodology selected for the dissertation, a description of the participants, questions that guided the dissertation, data collection and analysis procedures and the description of how human subjects were protected. Chapter IV contains the dissertation's findings, the profiles of the students and an analysis of their reflections. Lastly, Chapter V includes the recommendations for further research, a discussion of the results, conclusions drawn from the reflections of the students and the final recommendations based on the completed dissertation.

This dissertation analysis the perceptions of African American sophomores that have reflected about some of the critical elements that lead to their academic success during their first year as college students. It is the intention of this dissertation that the analysis of these reflections be used by future students, faculty and college administrators in an effort to create a strategic plan for strengthening the colleges ability to adequately support at risk student populations. By participating in the development strategies for increasing the academic success of African American students the entire campus community can take ownership of the accomplishments and failures of this group, therein working to create an environment of shared accountability and commitment to the overall success of African American students.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

The literature review is designed to lead to a clear understanding of factors relevant to the first year African American student experience. The review explores the first year experience for college students, retention of first year college students, factors that lead to first year academic success, student expectations of the institution and cultural aspects that can influence the learning experience of African American students.

The first section examines the first year experience, specifically targeting pre-enrollment factors influencing first year college students and Tinto's model of student departure. The second section investigates the freshman transition process and relevant research on first year programs designed to orientate students to college life. The third section describes cultural elements in the education experience of African American students. These areas of study are paramount in determining best practices for college faculty and staff in understanding and supporting African American freshman persistence and success. The studies reviewed in this section provide a theoretical context for how academic preparation; family support, culture and college environment can be applied to the population of interest in this dissertation.

#### First Year Experience

Every year, first time California community college students face unique and varying challenges to their academic and social growth. When compared to previous undergraduates these students are more socially tolerant; more goal oriented and appear to have a greater focus on career and monetary success (Cawthon and Miller, 2003).



Today's students are more technologically advanced; more socially networked and have a better understanding of cultural awareness than any generation before them. These factors make this population different from previous groups and many institutions are in a state of transition in order to meet the demands of this new demographic. This dissertation is an investigation into the factors that influence the academic success and persistence of first year African American students at California community colleges.

### *Pre-enrollment Factors*

This section illustrates the literature associated with the first-year or freshman experience as it pertains to student's needs and perceptions. As an instructor at a metropolitan community college within the state of California I can attest to the significance of pre-enrollment factors that are evidenced within much of the literature associated with the college experience. Roberts (1995) stated that there are four types of adjustments that first year college students must face: academic, social, emotional and general. Roberts work supports the notion that students that are from stronger family units and had access to greater resources performed better during the first year of college, while those students who did not come from strong family's or had limited resources performed at lower levels academically.

A contributing factor to the low performance of African American students in college is the poor job K-12 systems are doing in educating this population. Though multiple variable can be attributed to student success before college the disproportionately high numbers African American students are facing obstacles to learning including public safety, low expectations from teachers and inconsistent disciplinary treatment (Anonymous, 2008). Moreover, The lack of cultural

understanding by school administrators and teachers can create obstacles for creating an environment for African American students to thrive academically (Perkins, 2008).

Students come to college with a variety of life experiences that make each student interact with the institution in a unique and personal way. Today's traditional freshman student is different from any previous generation of college student because of his/her experiences with technology, culture, and personal relationships. This generation of first time college students is living within a country that is more diverse than it has ever been and is connected seamlessly with the world through the advantages of technology and access.

Although this generation of college students benefits from social, political and societal changes long standing obstacles such as race and racism still stand as barriers to academic success in college (Harper, 2006). The inclusion of race in the exploration of issues facing African American students is applicable due to the complex nature of race within the United States. Race is a part of the African American college student experience because race is a part of the everyday lives of African American students. Therefore in order to determine authentic solutions to the problems facing African American college students it is imperative to include the notion that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century race still matters (West, 1992).

As technology becomes increasingly efficient and customizable it offers new opportunities for students to incorporate it into their educational experiences and preferences. The internet, CD's, television and personal computers have forever changed the tools used by students to gather and process information (Shneiderman, 2003). Therefore institutions must be aware that this current generation of college students will

inherently demand more technologically from their instructors and campus than ever before. This provides an innovative opportunity for colleges to connect with its first year student population in a manner that is generationally appropriate.

The experiences of students before they arrive at college can affect their ability to succeed academically and adapt to college life. In regards to predictions of students success, studies have shown that a student's previous academic record, standardized test scores, socioeconomic status, race and gender can have an impact on their adaption to an institution of higher learning (Astin, 1993). The research suggests that students come to college with elements such as standardized test scores and high school grade point average's that can often serve as predictors of their academic success and overall satisfaction with the institution (Astin, 1993, 1997; Johnson, 2002; Ward-Roof, 2003; Wolcott, 2006). In addition to the individual elements that students bring to college, today's students are more focused on correlations between degree completion and career advancement (Cawthorn and Miller, 2003).

A common theme in the research of pre-enrollment factors contributing to student success is the support system in place for the student by the family unit. The family's support or lack thereof can be directly related to student persistence during the first year (Tinto, 1993). The transition to college can be difficult for both the students and the family unit therefore when the time comes for students to attend college their emotional state can be influenced by how much their parents support them. Institutions that promote open channels of communication with the parents or provide opportunities for families and students to become orientated to current college expectations provide a stronger support system for their students (Austin, 2003). This communication can

manifest in the form of written letters, materials about the college or orientation programs that are designed for both the student and the parent (Austin, 2003). Direct communication between the institution and the parents can help alleviate questions and concerns about the college's programs and services for both the student and parents.

Within the research on pre-enrollment factors the most significant area of support is in regards to the economic stability of the student and their ability to finance their education. The literature suggests that when parents are able to provide financial support, students are not as worried about financing their own education. Therefore when being financially supported, students are less likely to worry about their economic situation and are less likely to seek employment in order to pay for tuition and supplies (Cawthorn & Miller, 2003).

Lastly the theme of technology and how the students of today are more technologically articulate than those from the last generation of college students was present in much of the research exploring this topic. Factors including access to personal computers and the growth of the internet have provided students with daily interaction with technology in areas of communication and the completion of both simple and complex tasks. Students are currently seeking a high level of technological sophistication from the colleges they choose to attend as they are looking for increased opportunities to integrate education into their lives (Cawthorn & Miller, 2003). This theme is increasingly relevant as colleges seek to create more opportunities for learning and retention through technology.

*Tinto's Model of Student Departure*

Tinto (1975,1993) was responsible for developing a highly respected model for the means of student persistence and departure. Tinto's work builds on past models of student departure from college in the fields of social theory, organizational sociology and psychology. His work added to the body of knowledge in this field by further expanding on the complexities associated with the college experience. Tinto's work expressly took into account the role of the institution in the matriculation and withdrawal process of a student and refocused the approach to matriculation away from the individual successes or failures of the student. Tinto's work explored the studies of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep, and authors Emile Durkheim and William Spady. Van Gennep (1960) studied the establishment of membership in traditional societies. This process was later described in his writings as "rites of passage"; these stages included separation, transition, isolation and incorporation. The rites of passage work explored by Van Gennep is conceptually equivalent to a student's persistence and adaption to the world of higher education on a college campus (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto applies the work of Durkheim (1951) and Spady (1970) to his theory of student departure. Durkheim's work argued that to prevent an individuals suicide that social restructuring was required promoting a complete integration into society of the individual. Tinto applied this notion to student departure by relating it to a student's environment including, his/her community as a factor that can have a profound impact on their college experience. Tinto (1993) asserts that the college experience for a student is comprised of both a social and academic component. Each component includes its own complexities, yet both work in tandem in establishing the complete college experience.

Within the model of student departure Tinto (1993) illustrates that two dispositions are responsible for how students react behaviorally to certain situations, these dispositions were identified as goals and commitments. Tinto defines goals by referring to the student's intentions, while commitments refer to that student's compliance in working towards their predetermined goals. Tinto's model suggests that the departures that students make from colleges and universities are stimulated from interactions and experiences with social and academic systems. How the students experiences or interacts with these systems as established by the institution will have a direct impact on that student's completion of established goals. Simply stated negative experiences will deteriorate a students commitment to the institution while positive experiences will solidify that students commitment to the attainment of goals and loyalty to the institution. Berger and Milem's (1999), study builds on Tinto's work and suggests that a student's perception of support from the institution will have an effect on the student's rate of persistence. Therefore if an institution can positively impact the communal and scholastic components of a students experience during the first year, then that student will have a much greater opportunity to succeed both socially and academically.

### Freshman Transition Process

#### *Orienting Students to College Life*

The beginning of a college career is often viewed as a traditional separation from family and required educational exercises to a higher level of chosen study and social independence. Austin (2003) suggests that institutions should incorporate into pre-enrollment activities or communication a means to connect the family to the new college

experience. Thus creating a tangible link between the students past experiences and future directions. The transition to college can affect students in a variety of ways including personal health, mental health, social adjustment and academic preparedness (Austin, 2003).

Due to the sheer number of options afforded to students once they have completed high school, colleges and universities must now appeal to multiple interests of the student body or enrollment could cease or decline. Strumpf and Sharer (1993) acknowledged that students are now expecting services from institutions that will assist them in the eventual achievement of their scholastic goals. These expectations can have a direct impact on how the student feels about their college experience from the very beginning and can serve as potential reasons for student departure. Therefore it is extremely important for colleges to incorporate an element of customer services into pre-enrollment or orientation efforts in an attempt to meet the expectations of this new generation of students (Gardner & Hansen, 1993).

Research has shown that students who are able to participate in a first year orientation program or first year experience courses typically perform at higher levels than those who do not (Austin, 2003). Additionally orientation programs for parents have been established in an effort to better condition families for the realities of college life and online or virtual orientations are an option provided by some California community colleges. Based partially on research and on best practices shared from colleagues, institutions across the state are using these varied approaches to strengthen the chances of first year student success.

Research has stated that when students progressed at a higher rate and were more successful during their first year when they were involved in campus activities and within the learning process (Astin, 1984). As research continues in the areas of persistence and retention Astin's work has been used in other studies (eg. Berger & Milem, 1999; Grosset, 1991; Kuh, 2003; Kuh, Shuh, Whitt & associates, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Astin (1996) reexamined his previous study on student involvement and through a review of data concluded that student involvement continues to have influence in student's persistence and attitudes towards the institution. The involvement of students during their first year has remained a constant theme in the research and suggests institutions that create opportunities for early involvement can have an influence in perception and persistence.

#### Cultural Influence During the First Year of College

##### *Issues Facing African American Students Enrolled Higher Education*

The diversity of today's community college student population reflects their aptitude to be tolerant of cultural differences and varied educational goals. The Community College League of California, (2008), states that the California Community Colleges (CCC) serves 63.7 out of every 1,000 members of the states population. Of that number 24.6% would be considered traditional first year students, 17-19 years of age and attending higher education for the first time. In terms of gender in 2006, 55.5% of the CCC population was female while 45.5% of the population was made up of males (Community College League of California, 2008). Among this population of students 7.2% self selected as African American, identifying them as the minority group with the third highest percentage of students within the system. Though African Americans are a



significant segment of the minority student population within the community college system, they often face unique outlying factors that can provide challenges to their overall academic success.

The literature based on student success in higher education supports the notion of parental involvement in a student's life and the student's home environment play significant roles in college preparation and projected future academic success. Moreover, it has been found that the decision to attend college and the process of applying to college has an emotional dimension to it and therefore associates a value in education within the family structure (Austin, 2003). Family input is a critical element to the overall achievement of a college student and in the case of the African American family unit; this element can be a crucial support mechanism or very real deterrent to seeking higher education. The family unit can also be expanded to include non-relatives that have influence in the student's life include friends, mentors and members of the community.

The close structure of many African American communities allows for a greater number of influential factors in the student's decision-making process. Whether some African American student's attend or remain in college can be affiliated with the influence of that student's community and their peers. This can be further complicated as many students of color are forced to successfully navigate the two worlds of home and school (Jalomo, 1995). Rendon, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) argue that institutions should work to assist students with this navigation between both worlds especially when diversity and varied cultural perspectives are listed as part of the overall purpose, mission and values of the institution.

In addition to an African American student's family unit, the student's K-12 experience and preparedness for higher education serves as an instrumental piece in predicting that student's success in college. Astin (1997) found students that had high standardized test scores and high grade point averages signifying their mastery of secondary education, typically completed college while those with low standardized test scores and low grade point averages exhibited lower percentages of matriculation and completion. Furthermore it is important to consider the considerable measure of academic disparity that African American students have faced by the ineptness of some teachers to motivate students of color.

A history of poor cultural understanding, improper attitudes and stereotyping toward African American students by society has served to substantially place African American students at a disadvantage in regards to equal access in education. In order to improve the education of African-American student's, colleges and universities must excel in preparing teachers and administrators to have an elevated level of authentic knowledge of African American culture; a deeper understanding of the impact African American culture has on behavior, learning styles, and a personal connection to the institution; and a genuine appreciation for the valuable gamut of experiences African-American students bring to institutions (Ford, Obiakor, & Patton, 1995). Creating and maintaining a minority undergraduate population at institutions of higher learning serves in ensuring equity for minority citizens and maintains a diversified learning environment for all (Green, 1989).

Research on the persistence of African American students in higher education suggests that the issue is complicated and multifaceted. Scholars argue varied reasons for

why this particular population continues to face challenges. Crosson (1988) suggests that the overwhelming nature of hostile racial climates that African American students must face in colleges directly impacts their academic achievement. Blackwell (1983) suggests that African American students more than any other population are less prepared academically to succeed in college therefore leading to poor rates of persistence and completion. Ottinger (1991) sites the poor socioeconomic situation of many African American is critical when considering persistence and ability to comprehend material.

As research continues with a concentration on African American student persistence these studies stand as support for the theory that African American students face a varied and complex set of circumstances when entering higher education. An understanding of this situation is critical if institutions are committed to generating transformative practices in a directed effort to serve this population of students.

### Summary

In summary, this review of the literature shows research on the first year experience with a direct emphasis on pre-enrollment factors that contribute to student development, Tinto's foundational model of student departure, the freshman transition process and cultural elements in the experiences of African American students. The study of the first year experience in colleges and universities is complex and varied. Though this review highlights years of comprehensive research, areas for expansion on previous data remain clear.

The California community college system faces a unique and challenging future. As the system continues to grow more and more students will be looking towards these institutions to complete their lower division coursework or to earn a degree in hopes of

attaining a place of value in the workforce. Consequently it will be increasingly vital for community colleges in the state of California to develop methods to meet the challenges of the new generation of an increasingly multicultural, socially networked, academically deficient, and technologically advanced first year student population entering their institutions. Astin's (1997) research helps frame the theory that direct involvement in the campus will strengthen persistence and success. This theme is present throughout the research about the first year experiences and serves as a constant when evaluating potential interventions for student success. Other factors explored in the literature on the first year experience include the significance of perceived institutional support by the students during their first year and opportunities for co-curricular participation.

The African American student population in higher education will continue to face varied challenges as outlined in the literature. At the forefront of the challenges for community colleges is developing strategies for how these institutions will service students who are not adequately prepared for higher education. Additionally how will African American first year students perform while facing a wide-ranging cadre of obstacles that have historically limited the scholarly progression of this population.

It's the responsibility of the California Community College system to understand the social and historical challenges facing this population and develop a plan of action to assist in the nurturing and development of these young minds. The institutions that make up the network of CCC's will be the first experience in higher education for much of the states African American population and for that reason serves a complicated roll as an institution for advancement to the university system and as foundation for improving basic academic skills. This review was constructed to illustrate the framework necessary

in adding to the current body of knowledge regard first year student success and sets the context for future research on metropolitan community college student success.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the experiences of African American community college freshmen in an attempt to improve institutional approaches to African American student success. Limiting the dissertation to a northern California urban/suburban community college expands upon previous research on freshman success at the community college level. In this dissertation, participants were asked to reflect on how the college served their needs as learners. Participants also reflect on the significant elements of college wide efforts to assist them in persisting during their first year of higher education. By identifying the factors that lead to student persistence this research may serve as an institutional resource for initiating dialogue and action among college administrators seeking to improve current institutional methods for student success.

#### Research Design

This dissertation used a qualitative research design that utilized analysis of the narrative (Riessman, 1993) as a method of data interpretation, allowing this researcher to extract themes from the stories of African American students who have successfully matriculated through their first year of college. Narrative research allows the researcher to collect data through the telling of the human experience by participants in the study (Elliott, 2005). This research method is used when the stories of individuals can provide unique and personal insight into a particular issue being studied. In analysis of the narrative the researcher works to collect reflections of past events through interviews or

observations and manufactures them into themes to create understanding of a larger question. Key characteristics of narrative research include inclusion of context to the telling of the story, a focus on the experience of the individual and an emphasis on the construction of personal accounts based on information gathered through interviews (Creswell, 2005). Utilizing a qualitative research approach in this dissertation allows the students to make a personal connection with the research process and eventually with the findings of the study.

By implementing this type of qualitative research the students become part of the possible solution and work towards making a positive change for future first semester students. Additionally this research method can empower students' in making change in an effort to improve the understanding of the institution in regards to the academic and social obstacles for African American students during their first year. Utilizing with analysis of the narrative, this researcher plans to identify common themes of success within the student's stories. Once these themes are identified they can serve as a flexible and detailed method for collecting and analyzing information (Bryant, 2006).

Analysis of the narrative serves as an excellent tool for evaluating transcripts of first-person stories or experiences. These first-person accounts are what this researcher plans to use to encourage dialogue between administrators, faculty, and students in developing meaningful campus resources to improve the academic success of African American students.

## Research Setting

This dissertation was completed at one Northern California community college. The institution is a part of the Los Rios Community College District and is located in the greater Sacramento metropolitan area. The college opened in 1970, with nearly 1,800 day and 350 evening students (CRC, 2009). Facilities included the science building, automotive and technology complex, women's physical education building, pool, and the library building. Later the college expanded to include, the Business/Social Science classroom building, computer laboratories, physical education buildings and a state of the art center for performing arts (CRC, 2009). Additionally the campus consists of 12 permanent buildings, including up to date fiber optics and satellite transmission resources for the best possible in information/communication services. Lastly, the cafeteria and college center encompass facilities for both the instructional foodservice program and student/staff needs.

The institutions average length of service for tenured faculty is 11 years additionally the longest tenured faculty member has been at the institution for 36 years. According to Los Rios office of human resources report (2006) of the 169 tenured or tenure track faculty at the college the ethnic makeup included 63% white faculty, 11.5% Hispanic faculty, 11% Asian faculty, and 10% African American faculty. The institution and the Los Rios district have recognized that the ethnic composition of the faculty at this campus is not truly reflective the ethnic composition of the student population and strives to promote more diversity within its full time tenure track instructors.

The college offers a broad option of more than 60 occupational degree programs, and a comprehensive curriculum of transfer courses. The institution takes pride in it's



diverse student population with over 50 percent of its' student body representing a variety of ethnic and international backgrounds. The college has constructed its own identity within the second largest community college district in the state of California. Yet still remains small enough to offer personalized attention and services, and large enough to provide extensive postsecondary options to the Northern California community it serves.

### Population and Sample

This researcher worked with six African American students in the sharing of reflections about their experiences as first year community college students. The students selected for this dissertation became both subjects and active participants in the improvement of institutional programs and services. Subjects selected for this dissertation have met the following criteria: (1) Currently enrolled as a 2<sup>nd</sup> year student at the selected college (2) Will have completed at least 24 units of academic coursework at the selected college by the Fall 2008 semester (3) Are in good academic standing. Recruitment for this dissertation was conducted in two phases, First, faculty members at the selected college who teach intermediate or second year curriculum were asked by the researcher via email to disseminate a letter to their African American students.

The letter introduced the dissertation and stated that if the students fit the described selection criteria and if they were willing to participate that they were invited to contact the researcher in order to set up an informational meeting. This recruitment process was proposed so that the researcher could deliberately gather representation of the African American student population from across multiple academic disciplines. Secondly, an email invited self-selected participants to an informational session at an off campus location to further explain the dissertation. At that time potential participants

were offered a consent form and a demographic questionnaire designed to gather information about their first year experience. No parental consent was necessary; the student's were all over 18 years of age when the research was conducted.

### Instrumentation

This dissertation involved two face-to-face one-hour interviews between the researcher and the subjects. In an effort to provide protection to the subjects, participants selected pseudonyms for themselves during interviews and in the reporting of the data. Moreover, the researcher applied a pseudonym for every instructor, manager or staff member identified in the interview sessions to protect the identity. Lastly the institution will was not directly identified and by holding the interviews in a local off campus location the subjects were further assured an anonymous experience. This researcher utilized this strategy to minimize stress or discomfort to the participants by making the interview environment a conference or meeting room off campus but within close proximity to the college. Additionally the questionnaire was coded for record keeping purposes and remains confidential. The two interview sessions were in the same location but were structured differently. The first interview was designed to obtain information and the second was used to establish clarification of the information obtained in the first session.

### *Research Questions*

1. What factors led to the persistence of African American students during their first year at a California community college?
2. Have college generated programs or services impacted the success of African American students during the first year at a California community college?

3. What recommendations do current African American students have for the institution and future African American first year California community college students?

The researcher used the questions stated previously in addition to a set of follow up questions in an effort to create a safe and comfortable environment. Depending on the depth of responses given by the interviewees the following follow up questions were utilized. Lastly, additional questions were only asked to encourage further elaboration on a particular response or to provide clarity for the researcher.

*Research Question #1: What factors led to the persistence of African American students during their first year at a California community college?*

Establishing question: Please describe yourself, where are you from what are your interests and goals.

- a. Please describe how you came to the decision to attend community college, and what were the factors that led to your choice in Cosumnes River College?
- b. What were some of your success and failures during your first year?
- c. Please describe your experiences with college faculty, administrators or staff during your first year.
- d. Please describe your first semester as a student at Cosumnes River College.

*Research Question # 2: Have college generated programs or services impacted the success of African American students during the first year at a California community college?*

Establishing question: Please describe any opportunities you had to utilize campus services or facilities.

- a. What were your expectations from the college in regards to services provided and your overall student experience?
- b. Please describe your experiences with using technology for school related activities during your first year.
- c. Please describe your perceptions on the availability of campus services specifically for the social or academic support of African American students at Cosumnes River College.
- d. Please describe your social interactions while on campus during your first year at Cosumnes River College.
- e. Please describe your overall academic performance during your first year at Cosumnes River College.

*Research Question #3: What recommendations do current African American students have for the institution and future African American first year California community college students?*

Establishing question: Please describe what you feel the institution and future freshman could learn from your experiences as a first year community college student.

- a. What helped you successfully complete your full first year at Cosumnes River College?
- b. As an African American student did you at any point during your freshman year feel excluded or not apart of the campus culture?
- c. What recommendations would you give to the institution to further assist African American students in achieving their academic goals?

### Data Collection Procedures

Riessman's (1993) research on narrative analysis describes this process of research as unlike other qualitative analysis do to its unique flexibility with no type of standardized procedures for conducting studies. Though the process is not standardized there are steps that guide it as a form of qualitative study. These steps include deciding how to facilitate the interview, the transcription of the interviews and an analytical evaluation of the narratives (Riessman, 1993). This dissertation project collected data through open-ended questioning connecting to the comments given by the subjects. Narrative analysis is appropriate for this dissertation because of the personal nature of its format and because it can be used to assist subjects in making sense of their experiences through a process of telling their own stories (Bell, 1988).

The researcher crafted three research questions and several establishing questions designed to promote the dialogue and generate an authentic narrative from the participants. The following is an outline of the steps taken to collect the data. Step 1 the college faculty were emailed to request their assistance in the recruiting of participants. Next, the recommended by faculty were asked via email to consider participating, those who self-selected to contribute the dissertation were then contacted. Step 2 included the completion of the pre-interview questionnaire by the students. After the questionnaire was completed students' were then provided a copy of interview questions. Subsequently the students were interviewed and recorded individually at an off campus location. During step 3 the first round of interviews were reviewed and transcribed by this researcher. Later, the participants were provided the common themes identified from the first round of interviews and a second interview was conducted and recorded. Lastly, the

second round of interviews were then reviewed and transcribed by the researcher. During Step 4 of the process the audio recordings were placed under lock and key and stored at 8401 Center Parkway in Sacramento California.

#### Data Analysis Procedures

Each interview session was audio recorded and later transcribed by the researcher personally. After the first round interview transcriptions were completed the researcher conducted a critical review of the narratives for relevant themes that were summarized and shared with the participants in the second interview. The interviews from the second meeting were recorded and later the themes from the two narratives were analyzed for commonalities throughout both narratives. The themes discovered in the combined narratives were then used as a basis for recommendations for future research, advice for future African American freshman and for suggested improvements in the institutions ability to serve its African American first year student population.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

The protection of human subjects is of extreme importance to the researcher. Therefore the researcher took careful measures to ensure that the participants had complete confidence in the entire research process. The researcher requested and received permission from Protection of Human Subjects committee from the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at the University of the Francisco and remains on file with the University. For a copy of the IRBPHS application, see (Appendix A). Additionally the researcher requested and received permission from the Los Rios Community College District to conduct this research on its student population and remains on file with the district. For a copy of the approval letter,

see (Appendix B).

The researcher provided each participant with a copy of the Subjects Bill of Rights and provided full disclosure of the research intent and process. In an effort to provide protection to the subjects, participants selected pseudonyms for themselves to be identified by in interviews and in the reporting of the data. Moreover a pseudonym for every instructor, manager or staff member identified in the interview sessions has been used. Lastly the institution was not directly identified in this dissertation and by holding the interviews in a local off campus location the subjects are further assured an anonymous experience.

The researcher attempted to further minimize stress or discomfort for the participants by making the interview environment a conference or meeting room off campus but within close proximity to the college. Additionally the questionnaire was coded for record keeping purposes and remains confidential. The researcher has chosen to conduct two interview sessions. The transcripts and audio tape of the interviews from this dissertation will be kept under lock and key at 8401 Center Parkway, Sacramento, CA 95823 for approximately 1 year after the dissertation has been completed, then the material will be shredded and destroyed.

#### Portrait of the Researcher

During this dissertation I was a fourth year doctoral student at the University of San Francisco in the International and Multicultural Education department. In addition to being a full time graduate student I was a professor of radio and new media at the institution selected for this dissertation. Lastly, I also served as a part time instructor in

the Communication studies and Bilingual multicultural education departments at a Northern California State University.

I'm an African American male in his early thirties and a former community college student. I'm a Northern California native and a graduate of the California State University system who remains extremely active in the African American college community through his membership in Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity incorporated, a historically black greek letter organization founded in 1911. I received my Masters degree in Education and have used my interest in African American student success and the first year college experience to guide my research agenda. Since graduating with my Masters degree I have given a variety of guest lectures and delivered multiple conference presentations covering best practices in teaching college students, applications for technology in education and the first year experience.

This dissertation was inspired by my experiences as a college student, my close connection to the California community college system and to its African American college student population. As a student I earned a cumulative 1.13 grade point average during my first semester in college and spent my first full year in higher education on academic probation. That humbling experience has shaped my approach to learning and higher education throughout my educational career. I have spent over fifteen years reflecting and studying the elements that contributed to his poor academic performance during my first year and am committed to further exploring the experiences of others as they attempt to navigate intuitions of higher education.

Lastly, as an African American faculty member I was able to create an environment that fostered open and authentic dialogue with the students through mutual



cultural understanding and an unbiased acceptance of the students social and academic experiences. Furthermore, I choose Critical Race Theory as the theoretical framework for this dissertation to provide context for the unique experiences many African American students face when navigating higher education institutions in the United States. Critical Race Theory can also serve as a method of further understanding the social, emotional and psychological state of African American students in higher education. For many African American students, going to college initiates a separation from many of the aspects that build an individuals support system including community and family.

The connection I have with this dissertation and African American students in California community colleges may be interpreted as researcher bias. Yet, in the context of this dissertation I would consider my close connection with the African American student population as an added strength. My understanding of the complex experiences of African American students and my presence on the campus provided me the opportunity to establish an environment that allowed for open and honest dialogue about real and valid issues facing this student population. I believe that by utilizing the personal experiences of faculty and students in the planning of services and resources could be used as an example for future researchers and the institution in promoting genuine change within the community college experience of future African American freshman.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

#### Introduction

This dissertation used an analysis of the narrative approach to explore the critical reflections of African American community college sophomores about their first year experiences. This research is intended to provide the institution and future students with information that could be used to improve the first year experiences of African American students as the college continues to grow in population and scale. This section includes feedback in the form of direct quotes from participants in the dissertation in an effort to showcase their individual experiences and provide insight into their feelings about their academic progress and the institution.

This dissertation was conducted through two rounds of interviews that were framed by the questions that guided the analysis. The first round of interviews was used to gather specific information about the participant and their first year experience. The transcripts of this round of interviews were then analyzed for common themes and from that analysis a second set of questions were developed and posed to participants. The second round of interviews provided an opportunity for the subjects to elaborate on key components of their first year experiences and allowed for a chance to further reflect on the factors that led to their persistence. The second round of interviews allowed participants to further dialogue about their experiences as African American students on campus. During this segment of the research process participants included information about their educational history and how past experiences informed how they approached the first year of college both academically and socially.

### Profiles of the Participants

The cohort of students used for this dissertation included a total of six participants that consisted of four females and two males. Each student in the cohort completed their freshman year at the institution and are currently full time students that have completed at least 30 units of coursework. As a cohort the students come from a wide array of backgrounds, four of the participants currently have jobs that employ them for twenty hours a week or more and two of the participants hold positions in the campus associated student government. Five of the six participants identify as Christians and one identified that they had converted to an Islamic faith one year prior to this interview. Five of the six participants were born and raised in the state of California, and each of the participants selected the institution based on its proximity to their residence. Four of the six participants stated that they performed well academically during their first semester while the mean of the self-reported grade point averages of all of the participants was 2.79.

The education levels of the parents of students selected for this dissertation was varied and included high school graduates, some college experience, associate degrees, bachelor degrees and graduate degrees. Two of the participants enrolled in and completed the college's freshman seminar course and each of the students surveyed claimed that the college was a culturally diverse and welcoming environment for African American students.

#### Serena

Serena is a 19 year-old African American female from Los Angeles, CA. She is currently majoring in biology and plans on attending medical school after she transfers from the community college. She currently lives at home with her parents and two

sisters. She commutes to and from campus on a daily basis using regional transit and currently does not have a job. Serena is a first generation college student and currently holds a 3.00 grade point average. She identifies as a politically conservative, catholic and is very involved in her local church. Lastly she is currently an active member in two student clubs on campus.

#### Eugene

Eugene is a 20 year-old African American male from Sacramento, CA. He comes from an academically weak high school within the local community of the college and worked 15-20 hours per week during his first year. Neither of Eugene's parents graduated from college and he plans to be the first person in his family to graduate from a four-year institution. He is majoring in Business and plans on transferring to a school in the California State University system. Eugene currently lives at home with his parents and commutes to campus daily. Eugene currently holds a 2.30 grade point average and is not actively involved in any on campus organizations.

#### Iesha

Iesha is a 19 year-old African American female from Sacramento, CA. She has a twin sister and currently lives at home with her parents and sibling. Iesha plans to be the first person in her family to graduate from college and is currently volunteering in local elementary schools in an effort to learn more about the teaching profession. Iesha converted to Islam during her freshman year and became very active in the Muslim Student Alliance on campus and serves as an officer in that organization. Additionally she works on campus as a student development office assistant and remains active as a member of the Associated Student Government. Iesha currently holds a 2.60 grade point

average and is a liberal studies major who hopes to one day become a kindergarten teacher in an urban school.

#### Samantha

Samantha is a 20-year-old African American student from Atlanta, Georgia who moved to California with her father during her senior year of high school. She is a public relations major, and plans on transferring to a four-year institution to pursue her bachelors of arts and masters degrees. Samantha has earned a cumulative 4.0 grade point average at the community college. She works 25-35 hours a week and holds an elected position in the campus Associated Student Government. Both of Samantha's parents are college graduates and hold professional positions. She lives in her own apartment near the campus and commutes to campus three days a week. Samantha is the oldest of six children and hopes that her siblings follow her example and attend a community college before transferring to a university.

#### Renee

Renee is a 19-year old African American female student from Oakland, California. Renee is a business and finance major who plans on working in the banking industry after graduation. She currently holds a 2.51 grade point average and works 30-35 hours per week on campus as an office assistant. During her first year Renee was very active in student government, the black student union and was a student in the college's freshman seminar course. She is an only child who still lives with her parents and commutes to campus five days a week from her home. Both of her parents hold college degrees and she comes from an academically high performing high school.

## Q

Q is a 19-year old African American male student majoring in television production. Q was born in Los Angeles, California and relocated with his family to the Sacramento area when he was in elementary school. He comes from an academically strong high school and graduated with a 2.35 cumulative grade point average. In high school Q reflects that he often did the bare minimum academically and would often only be motivated to perform to stay active as a member of the golf team and as a member of the high school choir. He holds a cumulative grade point average of 2.67 at the college and is a member of the college's golf team. Q aspires to transfer and play golf at an NCAA division II institution and eventually become a sports broadcaster. Q works 15-25 hours a week, commutes to campus three days a week and lives at home with his parents. Table 4 provides a demographic synopsis of the participants selected for this dissertation.

Table 4

*Demographic Data of the Student Participants*

Student Name	Age(s)	Gender(s)	Declared Major	Grade Point Average
Eugene	20	Male	Business	2.30
Iesha	19	Female	Liberal studies	2.60
Q	19	Male	Television production	2.67
Renee	19	Female	Business finance	2.51
Samantha	20	Female	Public relations	4.00
Serena	19	Female	Biology	3.00

## Findings

### *Research Question #1: What Factors Led to the Persistence of African American Students During Their First Year at a California Community College?*

This dissertation provided an opportunity for subjects to reflect and dialogue about some of the factors that lead to their academic persistence during the first year of college. Throughout the conversations about their freshman year of college the first research question generated two very distinct subthemes: (a) Making personal connections with college faculty effects the overall learning experience; and (b) Involvement in campus activities can lead to a stronger connection with the campus and serve as motivation for matriculation.

#### Personal Connections With College Faculty

All six of the students stated that making personal connections with professors' added value to their overall educational experience during their first year. Though each of them had unique experiences with professors across multiple disciplines the common theme that ran through all of their reflections was that when a professor showed a personal interest in their education it motivated them to care more about their own progress. Through the interviews conducted in this dissertation students' reflected on beginning college without having a connection to the faculty and how this significant shift from the familiarity of a high school setting lead to feelings of isolation and anxiety when they first arrived. The following quote was generated from Samantha when asked about her interactions with professors once she arrived on campus and started classes.

Samantha explains:

They were all very, very helpful. One in particular I ended up spending a lot of time with; he's become somewhat of a mentor, very, very

helpful. Another one of my professors who is also my advisor with Student Government was wonderful. I've had like a really great experience working with my professors. I just love the professors and the environment and how you get a more personal one-on-one connection with your professors than at a four-year university. They make me want to be here and do well.

Q also comments on how making connections with instructors helped him during his first year. "The community college level and the faculty at the college have really, really helped me to become the person I am today in taking my education more seriously."

These statements from student's support the idea that making a personal connection with the instructor can provide much more than motivation to attend class, a connection can provide students with an emotional tie to the institution that further links them to the learning process. A connection with a faculty member can also serve as an opportunity for student to learn first hand about the differences between high school and college.

Iesha explains how as a student a faculty member may be able to help you change your thinking about being successful in college:

To be a student, you have to have the right mindset. You've got to be here to actually want to do something. A professor told me once that if you're just here to waste your time, you can do that anywhere else and if you're going to do that you might as well just do it somewhere like a some dead end job where you're making money rather than just wasting your time and hanging out and doing nothing. You need to be able to conquer other stuff that's going to come your way and really focus on the education side and embrace what you're learning. I'm sure that there's probably some really good information that I should have learned and I should have understood from my first two semesters and high school as well, that I just didn't.

Renee's perspective illustrates how the influence of a professor can have an immediate effect on students, she explains:

My first year, my professors were great. I had one particular teacher, she was my freshman seminar teacher, she was awesome. Like we couldn't really understand her but we got her points by the way she described things, it made you want to go to college. It was a freshman seminar class and she wanted you to succeed here. But she really taught me a lot of things, especially about time management. I was



always so busy so I never took the time to say, this time is for me and I need this time for my books and this time for study and this time for work. So if it wasn't for her, I probably would still be struggling.

Serena had varied experiences with professors, some interactions were extremely positive and some created new challenges. She states, "I did not choose maybe the right teacher and it was hard for me to understand his class. Then when I went to the Math lab it really did not help as far as it was too two different teaching styles. So the lesson I learned was to make sure I choose the right Math teacher." This experience has led to Serena's decision to learn more about professors before she enrolls in classes. The practice of selecting professors based on reputation and past encounters is very important in creating the best possible scenario for academic success. In addition to using personal experience to determine what professors to select as instructors, students also utilize peer networks and in some cases the Internet to evaluate their probable success based on the reputation of the professor.

It's clear that after analysis of the transcripts from both rounds of interviews that contact with professors both inside and outside of classroom is just as important as contact with other students. Professors can serve as an integral part of a student's education through work as mentors, advocates and as resources in navigating the matriculation process. Furthermore social interactions with other students can serve as a means of peer mentoring and peer support systems.

Renee reflects on how she felt about college during her first year and what type of connections with school she was accustomed to:

My first year here was pretty difficult. I really didn't have my mindset to attend school, but in order to stay on my parents' benefits I had to go to school. So I think for the most part, coming to college and really trying to do the transition from high school was really hard for me. I was making great money working for

the bank and I enjoyed it. I worked there during high school, too, so I enjoyed it and that was the only thing I really knew or really that got me by in high school was having a job and making sure they checked my grades and all that things. When I got to college, my first semester, no one did those things and I think I kind of fell through the cracks, like oh, I don't have a bell to get me to class or I don't have anyone to remind me to go to school. So I was content just working and taking one or two classes. It was so convenient, no one told me, you have to take this and you have to take that, so I just chose the easiest classes just so I could work more hours to make money.

Eugene reflects on the transition to college from high school, "First year, like I said, I was mainly trying to get a feel for the college experience but at the same time I had a lot of other things going on as well." These subjects' provided insight into one of the issues that may face future African American students when making the transition from high school to college. Three of the six participants spoke of having the right mentality for college and how for them being mentally prepared was the most challenging aspect to performing well as a student.

Serena explains:

I'd tell the incoming freshmen to you know, not only ask for help if you need it but anytime to get to know the professor and especially when you need to find out something. But also come onto campus with a certain type level of courtesy and intelligence because now that you're coming from high school, you are legally an adult and you should act like one. Because when you come to the campus you have to hold the mentality of being a college student because that's what's expected of you. If you don't then you will not survive here long or go on to mentality of a college student, otherwise you'll stumble and fall.

The mentality of the student as referenced in this quote highlights many of the challenges facing incoming students. Not clearly understanding the difference between college and high school can leave some students confused and lacking in the necessary skill sets to connect constructively with faculty. The lack of these college social skills can cause setbacks to a student's overall acculturation to college life and their progression academically by isolating them from the networking opportunities engagement with

faculty can provide. The subject Eugene explains his personal feelings about approaching college from a mentality that is open to social interactions and showing the initiative to make connections with his professors. Eugene explains:

I was an interactive person in high school, so this to me was nothing new. I'm not really shy, so talking to people and socializing with even professors isn't hard for me. I think that when you socialize a lot more, you find a lot of different network opportunities and then it makes everything come together when you're in college. Because if you need help with something and you talk to this person that can help you with it, you can just go straight to him and get it. Instead of you know, if you're quiet and shy, don't want to talk to anybody, it's kind of harder.

The right mentality and making personal connections with faculty comes up again with Iesha. She explains:

Okay. So my first semester, I came with the high school mentality. Because while I was in high school, I had a lot of freedom; I was involved in every club and I really didn't put much effort into my schoolwork. So I felt like I would be able to come over here and like so-called run the school as I did in high school. Like just tell the teacher anything and they'll believe me and I could just get by with doing halfway done work and all this stuff. So I was kind of cocky and arrogant, I guess you could say and I'd always be running around with my friends. I remember leaving campus all the time, or, I don't need to go to this class, or, that class is not that important and stuff. So I just kind of had that mentality of just like I'm here, whatever, school's not that important and I'm here to socialize type thing. And so yeah, I hit a wall really fast, and I figured out that you have to come with more respect for what college is and how your professors can be cool.

These students have been affected in positive ways by constructive social interactions with their professors and these contacts have made a significant impact on how they approach college. The relationships established between the students and the faculty has given way to new opportunities for the students to benefit from the knowledge of the instructors beyond the subject matter they teach.

Five of the six African American students in this dissertation had different relationships with their African American professor that with their non-African American professors. Throughout the conversations the participants expressed a distinct connection

with faculty that shared cultural norms, those who more effectively communicate with African American students and those who might have struggled with similar issues during their time as students. Iesha explains her feelings towards African American professors:

I wouldn't say that my interactions are extremely different one minor difference would be that we speak to each other. You know like they understand what I am saying and I don't always have to speak proper. There's that internal understanding, we understand each other because of our ethnicity and some of the experiences that go along with being black. We are a lot more comfortable with each other. With my non African American professors there are some boundaries that I would not cross with my African American Professors. Because it's more acceptable and its just more natural the openness and the warmth that black people share with one another it just like that.

Renee reflects on her feelings about the difference in working with an African American professor compared to working with a professor from another ethnic background. She explains:

I think that if you have a teacher that is of the same race, I think you feel more comfortable with them in knowing that they are out to help you. And they have some of the same experiences, whether it was racial differences or any cultural... anything. I think it works out better because I mean, a Caucasian teacher can't really say, "Well, I had that same experience," because they are white.

Eugene also shared his experiences with African American faculty and theorizes why their presence on campus is so beneficial to African American students. He explains:

I would say we connect more only for the simple fact because there's not too many on campus and there's a lot of African Americans here. So when we did see some, or see African American professors, the relationship between us is more... I wouldn't say friendly, but it's more understanding, in a sense.

From the evaluation of these transcripts it's clear that the interactions these student's have with professors that share cultural heritage or shared experiences supports the theory that students can benefit from a diverse faculty and the personal experiences of professors who may have faced similar challenges through their academic journey.

## Involvement in Campus Activities Can Lead to a Stronger Connection With the Campus and Serve as Motivation For Matriculation.

As the participants discussed the first year experience, the concept of campus involvement became very prevalent. Though all of the participants mentioned involvement in their reflections about the first year. Three of the six reflected on how being involved on campus with organizations or services played a major role in their progression through the first year. Their experiences with being involved on campus were framed either by an initial lack of involvement during the first year and how they later recognized the value in participation, how being active on campus can serve as an opportunity to gain access to new resources, or the reflections reiterated the benefits associated with being active in some sort of campus organization or club. Samantha explains how not being involved initially changed once she recognized the value in student organizations.

I think that not just for African Americans, but I think students in general, though, need to be more involved with each other. I think that unity, coming together and helping each other even if it's just African Americans or any group at all, people need to come together. I think that the campus itself, whether it be like a certain club or a certain group needs to find a way to bring all the students together and show that... along with the professors and that they have support and that if they need anything, that our professors are there. Like we have a Welcome Day, but usually on a Welcome Day we just give out free food or a snack or something. But I think maybe there needs to be something where we have activities, like a get to know each other activity and get people's energy up and their spirits up. . Because like I said, I think that involvement and having a professor that can help you or a mentor in your campus with you really, really helps, because I honestly don't think I would have been able to do it without the involvement on campus or without my professor.

Samantha's statement speaks to the connection some of the subjects had with the institution based on an involvement and how it can generate opportunities in bringing students together from varied backgrounds and experiences. Through the reflections of

the subjects the type of involvement a student can participate in can be very diverse. Student involvement could be interpreted in a number of ways including participating a club, being a part of college athletics, joining student government, utilizing extended opportunity and programs and services or developing a mentor/mentee relationship with a professor or coach. During the interviews Serena reflected on how becoming involved changed her college experience, she explains:

My first semester I did feel kind of excluded because I was not a part of a whole lot of everything. I didn't join MESA (Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement) until the end of the semester, my first semester. The second semester, that's when I started doing a whole lot of things. I got involved in the Science Club and MESA more where I was going near every day now, five times, five days out of the week. And being around more that, I got more intertwined more with the society on campus. So the first semester I was excluded because I didn't get into anything and I was just by myself. The second semester kind of opened up a whole new door when I started getting involved in more things.

Iesha was able to overcome some serious challenges during her first semester in college by becoming involved in some of the student service opportunities provided to students by the college. Iesha explains:

I started to learn because teachers would put emphasis, like, "Aren't you enrolled in the Reading and Writing Lab?" I'm like, what is that? So I would have to go take a look and see what it was and like it's a great facility for students to use. The thing I think most students, we don't get involved in a lot of facilities on campus or the resources because we don't know about them and the reason we don't know about them is because we're not paying attention. Getting involved in our services on campus is so important to being successful. It really helped a lot.

All of the participants discussed involvement but there was a difference between how the female students seemed to value involvement and how the male students valued being active or connected to the campus through extra curricular activities. Additionally neither of the male participants focused on attending college directly after high school. Based on the dialogues with these two individuals it I would argue that the lack of

involvement on campus was increased by their hesitancy in attending. Eugene had planned on joining the United States Marine Corp before he ended up at community college and from his own admission this contributed to his less than enthusiastic interest in attending school. Eugene states, “First off, I was not prepared for college. Through high school, my main focus was not college. I didn’t really have no perception of college because like I said, that wasn’t my focus right out of high school.”

Q was also initially hesitant in attending college after graduation, he explains, “Out of high school I really didn’t have the head for college, like I said before, I never really have been a good student.” Based on information gathered through the pre interview questionnaire Q’s only high school commitments were the black student union and the gold team. Therefore it is likely that the opportunities available to him as a first time college student could have been ignored or he may have been oblivious to their existence.

Q’s limited involvement with the campus outside of his academic requirements was confined to playing for the golf team. His interactions with classmates were limited to in class activities and he reflects that he would often spend little time on campus socializing. Eugene has approached becoming more involved in the college experience from a social perspective. He makes reference to spending time on campus outside of class as a social exercise with no established structure or purpose. Eugene’s campus involvement was limited to hanging out with friends and though this is a valid reason for spending more time on campus he was unable to associate that type of interaction as beneficial to his first year success. Though Eugene was unable to make the connection between hanging out on campus and persistence, social involvement into college is a key

element in making students feel as if they are a part of the institution. This integration or involvement in the campus macro culture can occur through communication with faculty or campus services (Tinto, 1993).

*Research Question # 2: Have College Generated Programs or Services Impacted the Success of African American Students During the First Year at a California Community College?*

The participants of this dissertation reflected on their experiences during the first year at a CCC and provided insight into what campus programs or services assisted them during their freshman year. The central theme that emerged from the dialogues regarding college programs and services was participation promotes a feeling of support and generates a stronger connection between the students and the institution. Three of the six participants reflected about active participation in a variety of campus sponsored programs or services and validated their interaction as critical in their progress through the first year.

Iesha reflects on her participation in and discovery of campus services:

The opportunities that I've had, they were presented to me but at first I really didn't embrace them, I didn't understand them, I didn't absorb what they were. So my first semester I paid for everything and that was probably like... Yeah, I paid for it, for sure. Then I started to learn what was EOP was. I had no idea that the college could give you money. It's probably not because it wasn't presented to me, it's just because I didn't absorb it—I didn't understand what it was. But then I started to learn because teachers would put emphasis, like, "Aren't you enrolled in the Reading and Writing Lab?" I'm like, what is that? So I would have to go take a look and see what it was and like it's a great facility for students to use. The thing I think most students, we don't get involved in a lot of facilities on campus or the resources because we don't know about them and the reason we don't know about them is because we're not paying attention. Getting involved in our services on campus is so important to being successful. It really helped a lot.



Iesha was not the only student who later discovered opportunities for student support provided by the campus. Samantha reflects on her experience:

Everything you need is here—like computer labs, for example. My favorite computer lab is the one in the library because it comes with headphones so while you're working you can listen to music on Youtube or MySpace or Rate My Professor.com or whatever. There's also... That lab that closes at 8:45 or 9 o'clock and the other two are in the specific... in the LRC. But there's plenty of computers for everybody. There's also a Math tutoring lab that you could enroll and it's like half a credit. You can go in there and get help from professors at any time. There's also the writing lab where they help you with your writing. There is the lending library, there's Financial Aid, which if you have any questions, you can ask them there. There's the cafeteria, there's... I mean, I used like most of them my first year and some of them I wasn't even aware of until this semester.

The variety of services combined with the access students have to technology creates an environment on campus that empowers students with support in many of the basic skills requirements for college. Computer labs are incredibly important to the academic success of first time students at the community college level. Beyond the social networking applications and the wealth of knowledge provided by the Internet, computer labs on campus allow socioeconomically disadvantaged students to have access to the tool necessary to complete their educational goals.

Serena's perspective on the availability of campus services and how they would impact her academic progress was influenced by her high school experience. She explains:

I expected them (the community college) to have some sort of help there as much as possible. I'm using the model from my high school... I mean, we had a computer lab and we had the library as well. We had services on campus to be able to help us to some extent. I was always in the library in high school and I had some help maybe from the librarians but I often gone to see my teachers after school and asked them as well to set up things to see if I could help... get some help with that. So in ways, yes, I expected at least that. Especially the technology stuff.

Serena's experience highlights possible expectations of students from academically strong or technology proficient high schools. She also reflects on participating in the reading and writing lab on campus, "Some of my successes were being able to adapt to the teachers' teaching styles and to be able to have access to the library and reading and writing center and especially my fellow students as well." Serena's participation in student services not only provided her with a means to understanding complex issues; it also provided an opportunity to work with other college students in a supportive and structured academic environment.

Those participants who elected not to participate in campus services during the first year still recognized their value and at times served as advocates for them within the student population. As a student assistant Renee reflects on her understanding of the services and systems provided by the institution and how they can work to support students as they navigate the community college system. "I haven't been one to use any of the facilities on campus, but I am an advocate for them; I tell students where they're offered." Renee's reflection is an example of how student recognize the benefits of the programs and services being offered even if they do not choose to participate in them.

*Research Question #3: What Recommendations Do Current African American Students Have For the Institution and Future African American First Year California Community College Students?*

Three distinct themes were identified in the review of the transcripts based on this research question. The student's recommendations for the institution as they relate to serving the African American student population could be isolated as one central theme. This theme included; (a) encouraging instructors of all backgrounds to build relationships

with the African American students they encounter. The reflection's of the participants echoed the sentiment that African American students are a unique population and as such may need to be encouraged more often in order to succeed at the rates of other groups. Additionally the reflections produced two themes as recommendations for future African American students; (a) social integration with the campus culture; (b) developing a personal relationship with your professors. All six of the participants reflected on the effects of becoming integrated into the culture of the campus and how that experience coupled with personal relationships established with professors provided additional incentive and insight into persisting academically and growing socially while attending the community college.

#### Institutional Recommendations

Each of the students used as subjects in this dissertation had suggestions for the institution in its growing efforts to serve the African American student population. Renee gave a strong message regarding the perceptions of the institution towards African America students. She explains:

I believe that professors and faculty, administrators and staff, need to understand that students, African American... And I mean not just African Americans but particularly them, they have struggles at home, they have struggles in other areas. So they come to school on a daily and they need to talk to someone or you see them struggling, when you see this, take the time, talk to them and actually see what's going on with them.

Serena's comments directed towards the institution focused on when African American students are recognized on campus and the effects outreach can have on a future student.

She explains:

Well, I have to say two things to them as far as that. As far as for African American students or black students, if you will, I would say not just do it just once a year as far as only one month when it's just 28 days, do that. Why not do

it at least maybe once a month or once a week, if possible, to show that African American students or black students, you could say, have a great chance of accomplishing or doing anything for that. And that kind of inspiration can instill into them... Or like another thing I would suggest for them is to go out to some of the schools and have them do presentations as far as having one of the CRC representatives come to the school and show them. Actually have a black representative go there and tell them that they can succeed at a community college.

Serena's message is simple and logical; if the community college truly wants to reach out to African American students then there must be more than black history month programs and general outreach attempts. The exploration of the contributions of African American must be ongoing and the outreach of African American students in high school must be targeted and multifaceted.

Samantha's recommendations for the campus are directed at the college's ability to establish and support opportunities for student engagement. She explains:

I think that the campus itself, whether it be like a certain club or a certain group needs to find a way to bring all the students together and show that... along with the professors and that they have support and that if they need anything, that our professors are there. Like we have a Welcome Day, but usually on a Welcome Day we just give out free food or a snack or something. But I think maybe there needs to be something where we have activities, like a get to know each other activity and get people's energy up and their spirits up and notice hey, you know, wow, there are a lot of professors here and this professor... Like even have a couple of professors speak, "Hey, I'm so-and-so and I teach this," etc., etc. Because like I said, I think that involvement and having a professor that can help you or a mentor in your campus with you really, really helps, because I honestly don't think I would have been able to do it without the involvement or without my professor.

Samantha in this statement makes an excellent case for faculty participation to extend outside of the classroom and for the college to become an instrument for not only intellectual growth but for social growth as well. Eugene's comments not only apply to faculty of the institution, his recommendation speaks to a possible need for the hiring of more African American professors campus wide. He explains:

Basically more African American teachers should be more active with African American students. Hands down, period (laughs). Because like me for example, I met a teacher and as a black man he has really given me a new person to look up to. I mean I didn't know that black professor were up here until him, I mean I barley had ever seen black male teachers and couldn't really imagine one at college. And he's down for us, black students and he's cool, not just some black dude acting white. He's really active with me, I talk to him, e-mail him and that helps me a lot because it gives me a different outlet as far as teachers. Not just white American teachers but black American teachers. And beside you feel more comfortable with black teachers, you kind of share a certain vibe with them so it just makes it better. So African American professors should be more active with the black students.

Q is an example of a student who has also benefited from the attention of an African American professor. He explains:

I'm not saying that maybe whites don't have a hard time but like bringing personal views can help black students relate to college. A black professor of mine gave us actually a big insight, which really opened my eyes to where I am now. He talked about, I believe it was the first or second day of class, if you remember, about his majors. About the GPAs the first semester and everything like that. And then that really opened my eyes like wow, he's really pretty much must like me. Dead on me, basically. So if he can do it, I can do it too. I used to really doubt myself a lot especially in the past. I've been getting a little bit better, my professors have been helping me about that throughout the year.

Iesha's reflection about what the institution can do to further assist African American students is clearly reflecting the idea that college cannot be easily navigated without direct support from the institution. College students in general and African American students specifically face varied challenges and obstacles in achieving their academic goals. She explains:

I don't know how to explain it, but I just think that just to treat them like students and not to belittle them in any way and to embrace the things that they are good at and to really push towards those things. Because I know for a fact that I feel like as a black student, we work harder in class and we like to engage in conversations and we like to participate, but how are we going to get motivated more at home?

## Social integration with the campus culture

The participants reflected on getting involved on campus and how being connected to the campus in some way in addition to taking classes provided them with more motivation and resolve as first year students. Students are not relegated to playing sports or joining clubs, there are student services and programs that have been established to aid in building a tangible connection to campus, that can be so often missed at commuter campuses. Renee reflects on one of the advantages of being more involved on campus and how those actions can provide new opportunities. She explains:

Right now I would say being involved is most important, I think that, it's proven that if you are in a college setting and you're more involved, you're going to do better in school. So if you're not involved you tend to be more... not relaxed, but you tend to be more shy and not willing to get help or go into the office hours. But if you're more involved you understand the opportunities that are given to you so you're going to take more advantage of them. So it works out.

Promoting campus involvement can also come in a variety of ways, but after reviewing the transcripts it becomes clear that it's important to establish for first time freshman clear limits in order to prevent a situation where academic progress is affected by the student's commitment to campus activities. There is no perfect balance or equation to this effort, yet it should be noted that the social connection that African American students make with an institution could be related to their overall persistence.

## Developing a Personal Relationship With Your Professors

Iesha reflects on how important it is for freshman students to connect with their professors outside of the classroom encounters. She explains:

Yeah, it's really important to know your professors, let them know you because they see hundreds of faces and you may see them and you think that oh, yeah, they know you but they won't know you unless... You have to make sure that they know your name so that when they see you in the hallways they do say something to you. You want to get that kind of connection with them to where

when they're grading your paper they're thinking about you not just like man, who is this? Just trying to figure out who this is and then it's just a paper. But when they're grading a paper and they understand who you are, the way you speak, the mannerisms that you have, it kind of makes it more real to them and they may or may not be able to understand better what your purpose is or what your goal is, what you're trying to get across to them through papers or assignments or whatever it may be.

This statement and previous reflections by the participants highlight the critical need for freshman students to recognize one of the fundamental differences between high school and college. Within higher education there is a greater chance that instructors are less likely and in some cases not willing to exert themselves in getting to know the individual needs and goals of students they encounter. Therefore if an African American freshman that seeks to establish a connection, may in fact need to initiate the contact and seek out mentorship. Eugene expresses his recommendation for incoming African American freshman. He explains:

Coming from high school, it's kind of like the teachers have to come to you, in a way. It's their job to know you and plus they see you all the time. So my advice for incoming freshmen, first year of college, just be ready to go *to* your professors. Don't just wait for them to come to you. Don't be afraid to ask questions, and trust me get help with the work its way different.

Eugene's comments are not rare among students who have successfully navigated the first year of college and who have found support in professors and mentors. Making connections with professor is not an absolute solution to the academic and persistence issues facing African American students at the community college level, yet perhaps this can be a starting point for realizing real change within one of the most valuable education resources ever established.

## Summary

The critical reflections of African American sophomores about their academic success during the first year, has yielded a number of opinion of what it means to succeed academically. For many of these students simply remaining enrolled in college while many of their friends and family members have halted or discontinued their pursuit of higher education is an accomplishment in itself. Additionally through the sharing of both successes and challenges these students have provided insight into a population that has historically been challenged in reaching proportionate rates of college completion compared to both majority and minority student populations.

The participants all reported that the campus climate and campus culture made them feel comfortable and that at no time did they ever feel excluded. The college generated a comforting environment or opportunity for equal access to learning resources. One student reflects on how included she has felt. "The campus itself is very diverse and I can't... No, I've never felt excluded anywhere, I always feel very welcome." Each of the participants in this dissertation shared a unique and important first year experiences. These reflections are based on a variety of factors and though there were common themes there were individual experiences that added diversity and depth to this process.

The following chapter includes a summary of the dissertation and conclusions based on recommendations for future research and the institution. This dissertation also generates new insight into a sub-population of current research already conducted on the first year experience and broadens that body of work to include community colleges as well as four-year institutions.



## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

This dissertation utilized analysis of the narrative to explore the critical reflections of African American community college students about their successful transition from the first-year to the second-year of college. The analysis of participant's reflections allowed for a rich and personal examination of the complex issues around first year African American student academic success. This dissertation serves as a resource for the institution and for the district in its' efforts to reach the African American student population. By utilizing the students in the examination of persistence and retention issues, this dissertation stands to provide new perspective and insight to current practices. For the purpose of this dissertation Critical Race Theory was applied as a part of this dissertation in reference to the historically unequal circumstances African American students have faced over the history of the American educational system.

Currently within the state of California there is greater access to higher education than at any other time in history, yet at California community colleges African American students achieve at substantially lower rates than all other students populations (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2007). This disparity in success rates between African American students and other student groups provides an opportunity to approach the problem of student success a valid topic for scholarly exploration. The research conducted through this dissertation candidly includes and analysis the experiences of African American students that have successfully matriculated from the first-year to the

second at a Northern California community college and identifies their recommendations for institutional change and for future student populations.

This dissertation investigated a cohort of six African American students who are currently in good academic standing and have attempted and completed their first year at the community college level. The research sought to explore the following questions and identity potential strategies for supporting and engaging African American community college freshman:

1. What factors led to the persistence of African American students during their first year at a California community college?
2. Have college generated programs or services impacted the success of African American students during the first year at a California community college?
3. What recommendations do current African American students have for the institution and future African American first year California community college students?

Two one-on-one interviews were used to gather perspective and insight into the experiences of African American community college freshman. These interviews provided an opportunity for students to dialogue about their personal stories of success and failure in a context designed to identify applicable strategies for success. The transcripts of these conversations were then analyzed to and used to unearth practical strategies that could be utilized to promote improvements in current persistence and retention rates. Furthermore, the student reflections revealed strategies for success that allowed them to complete the first year of college and provided warnings for potential

pitfalls facing future students as they enter higher education through the ranks of community college.

### Discussion

Based on the design of the dissertation, the discussion is organized around exploring the three research questions that guided this dissertation. The responses of the participants were explored in an effort to identify noteworthy themes that may have emerged from the dialogues. The themes that have been identified represent the perspectives of African American community college students who have all persisted to the second year and continue towards their educational goals in good academic standing.

*Research Question #1: What factors led to the persistence of African American students during their first year at a California community college?*

Two principal themes emerged from this research question (a) Making personal connections with college faculty and staff; and (b) Active participation in campus clubs or organizations are critical elements to the continued persistence of African American students. During the reflections the participants were open about how important becoming a part of the campus community was to how they perceived their academic experiences. Additionally each of the participants remarked on how essential it is for African American students to take advantage of the opportunities for engagement provided to them by the institution and to seek out support from faculty and staff at the very beginning of their college career.

#### Personal Connections

All six of the participants made comments in their reflections, that establishing a personal connection with a professor or staff member had a significant impact on their

desire and ability to persist through the first year of college. Participants reported that the benefits of making personal connections with faculty or staff included extra help with course work, first hand mentoring about the higher education process and the establishment of special connections to the institution.

Five of the six participants made remarks to how their interactions with African American professors compared to non-African American professor generated a deeper sense of support and guidance as first time freshman. Crosson (1988) argues that the racially hostile environment colleges can breed make it vital for African American students to have contact with college faculty that may be more attuned to their The primary difference between interactions with African American professors and non-African American professors as presented by the participants was in how African American students and faculty related to one another through shared experiences and understandings. Having African American professors on campus that African American students can build relationships with is a critical element in providing support to students as they navigate the communities of academia and home (Jalomo, 1995).

By interpreting these reflections using Critical Race Theory as the established framework race is still a relevant issue in the overall academic and social success of African American students. The participants stated that African American professors had successfully navigated college and were willing to share their own experiences and recommendations with students in an effort to help the better understand college as an institution. According to the students' African American professors were able to provide mentoring from the perspective of a shared cultural background with the subjects and this was seen as both helpful and inspiring by those who participated.

The first sub-theme that emerged from these reflections identified making social connections with other students was critical in providing an environment of peer mentoring and support. This social connection also serves as a form of further motivation for students to become more aware and accountable for issues relating attendance and academic progress. Additionally this form of interaction served students by helping them develop social skills and a social network that proved useful when selecting courses and spending extended amounts of time on campus. By interacting socially with other students, participants reflected that they felt more apart of the campus culture and consequently instilled in them a sense of school sprit and pride in being a college student.

The second and final subtheme that emerged from this area indentified that students' must discipline themselves mentally for the rigors of higher education. Three of the six participants reflected about not initially being mentally prepared for college and how their lack of understanding about how different college was from high school had an impact on their academic progress during the first year. They commented that high school was a place that they were comfortable and they knew what was expected of them because they had been around that style of schooling their entire lives. Through reflections the participants commented about having all of their educational decisions made for them in the k-12 system. Their books were loaned to them, their schedules were predetermined, their free time was scheduled and their access to the outside world was limited by closed campuses and bells that told them when to attend and leave class.

When they attended college for the first time, participants reflected that they weren't sure on what classes to take, they were not clear about how to get textbooks and

they were surprised that they were ultimately responsible for attending class and how much time they spent on campus. Participants eventually used social connections to acclimate themselves to differences between high school and college. Furthermore these connections with other students or with faculty became key in assisting the participants with making it through a very difficult transitional period.

Personal connections with others associated with the campus were cited as being important to all of the participants. Samantha reported that her connections with a professor made her want to come to school when she was struggling in a course, that connection has since developed into a mentoring relationship. Renee has benefited from her exposure and relationship with college staff provided through her involvement in student government by finding on campus employment that is flexible around her school schedule. Eugene has used his personal connections with faculty and peer networking in evaluating what instructors to take and what path he should follow in regards to transferring to a four-year institution. For Q, the relationships he has developed with professors have afforded him important insight into local and regional universities he was considering as destinations after community college.

### Involvement

Three of the six participants self identified themselves as being highly active in campus events or programs. These students were involved in a variety of programs including student government, clubs and college athletics. They credited their involvement in these extra curricular activities to providing additional motivation to attend classes and achieve academically. The three participants that were not actively involved in the campus stated that they recognized the benefits of involvement and if they

were not associated with clubs or organizations on campus during their first year they made an effort to get involved as sophomores.

A form of support and influence came from students who were involved with student government as freshman. More than the typical student experience these participants were consistently exposed to peers who were student leaders on campus. Additionally these participants' had exclusive opportunities to work with college administration and faculty leaders as part of the colleges shared governance structure. As a member of the student government program students were also exposed to course in leadership, and peer conflict management. These participants also were able to attend conferences and workshops that allowed them unique opportunities for personal and professional development. Several of these participants commented on how this access affected their priorities and their academic goals as they pertained to transfer and their desire to attempt to earn advanced degrees.

Participants were very candid about their experiences with being associated with campus organizations including the Black Student Union. Though each of the participants recognized that the organization existed none of the participants were currently involved. The participant's reflected that they felt that the Black Student Union could be an organization on campus that immediately connected with African American first year students and should be presented as an opportunity to develop connections with faculty and staff of color. Unfortunately none of the participants' felt that that the club was reaching it's full potential, therefore it was losing out on the energy and ideas of new members. In some reflections the participant's negative perceptions of the Black Student Union were directly associated with the lack involvement of African American faculty

and staff. Others believed that it was the responsibility of the African American student body to organize and empower the club. One participant reported that he was active in the high school version of the Black Student Union and based on the lack of visibility of the club in college he felt that it couldn't have been the same type of organization. Each of the participants remarked that they felt that the significance of the organization lied within its social networking potential and its power to connect with African American employees of the campus with African American students.

The research has shown that students who participate in organizations and programs are more successful and make more meaningful connections with the institution compared to non-participants (Astin, 1984, 1993; Berger & Milem, 1999; Crosson, 1988; Ford, Obiakor, & Patton, 1995; Tinto, 1993). In addition to the Black Student Union the participants discussed, student government, athletics, student sponsored clubs, reading and writing centers, the extended opportunity programs and services office and the mathematics engineering science achievement program as opportunities in campus involvement. Astin (1984) suggested that when college students are involved in campus life and cocurricular activities that they are more successful. The findings of this dissertation support that assertion. Being involved in some part of the campus in addition to academics has led to the personal development or academic achievement of all of the participants in this dissertation. Participants reported that being involved in the campus has added value to their overall educational experience and has made an impact in what they hope to achieve in subsequent life after community college.

The participants of the dissertation were complementary of the college faculty, staff and administrators they had the opportunity to interact with during their first year.



The college campus was described as a welcoming and supportive environment that provided numerous opportunities for students to engage in activities and be intellectually stimulated. Each of the participants commented that they had never felt excluded as minorities or discriminated against because of their race or gender. They all reflected on how the college worked to acknowledge a variety of cultural groups through workshops, fairs, guest speakers and special programs therefore living up to its well publicized commitment to cultural competence. Samantha reflected that the campus was a place where she felt safe to be who she was and was a place where she felt she could grow as a person both academically and socially.

*Research Question #2: Have college generated programs or services impacted the success of African American students during the first year at a California community college?*

College programs and services are designed to provide support and assistance to students during their college experience. Programs and services offered by the community colleges can include financial aid, disabled student services, veteran services, academic and psychiatric counseling, computer labs and tutoring opportunities. These programs are identified as student services and serve in combination with instructional services a comprehensive learning environment.

Three of the six students reflected that they were actively involved with student services during their first year and that these services provided them with the support they needed to finish out the year. Iesha commented about her experience with student services during the first year as an opportunity to expand her understanding of how colleges instituted opportunities to assist students. Samantha also dialogued about the

discovery of student services during her first year. In her case the availability of on campus computer labs with high speed internet provided her the access she needed to complete homework assignments and network socially via the world wide web. Serena utilized the campuses reading and writing labs as an opportunity to gain help with her English course. She reflects that the lab allowed her the extra time she needed to better understand what her instructor was lecturing about in class. Additionally the labs provided an opportunity to associate with other students and form peer tutoring and support mechanisms.

The students' who did not take advantage of student services during their first year all reflected on their availability and eventual involvement in student support programs. Additionally participants' reflected on the importance of spreading the word to other students about the opportunities for student support offered by the campus and the benefits of taking the time to get involved early in the academic process.

The central theme that emerged from the dialogues regarding college programs and services was participation in student services promotes a stronger connection to the institution and provides support during a period of transition. Three of the six participants reflected about active participation in a variety of campus sponsored programs or services and validated their interaction as critical in their progress through the first year. The numerous services offered by the campus combined with the access to technology, establishes a supportive network on campus that allows students access to basic requirements for college success.

All six of the students commented on the importance of having access to computers during their first year. The computer labs on campus are incredibly important

to the academic success of first time students at the community college level because many of the instructors have web-based content and the college utilizes the internet as a means of registration and communication. Beyond the social networking applications and the wealth of knowledge provided by the internet, makes computer labs on campus a link to technology for socioeconomically disadvantaged students who must have access to the tools necessary to complete their educational goals.

*Research Question #3: What recommendations do current African American students have for the institution and future African American first year California community college students?*

This research question yielded three distinct themes relating to recommendations for the campus and recommendations for future African American students. The principal recommendation for the college was very specific: (a) encourage instructors of all backgrounds to build relationships with the African American students they encounter. This particular recommendation from the participants elicits a sense that African American students are a special student population and as such may need additional support mechanisms in place in order to succeed at the rates of other groups. Though the college is a welcoming environment for African American students, this population is still overcoming historical inadequacies in education and preparation for higher education. These reflections also produced two distinct recommendations for future African American students; (a) social integration with the campus culture is critical for success; and (b) developing a personal relationship with your professors is beneficial to your academic and social progress.

All six of the students in this dissertation made reference to the importance of open communication with professors. The comments of the students suggest that the relationships between professors and students must come from a mutual desire to develop partnerships that can enhance the educational experience of the student. Some of the participants viewed the professors on campus as valuable resources that could be mined for information and advice. Additionally professors served as supporters for the participants often challenging them to achieve academically and to broaden their interests. One student remarked that their relationship with their professor during the first year made them want to be at school and knowing that someone other than a family member cared about their academic progress provided a special motivation for success.

The recommendation for the instructors to foster relationships with the students I believe speaks to one of the essential benefits of the community college environment. The participants recognize that not every student will be open to fostering contact with professors outside of the required course content, yet they felt the option would not only appeal to many African American students but would assist them in their transition from high school. Regardless of the professor's ethnic background or academic discipline, each of the participants recognized that having an instructor take an interest in their college career had a significant positive impact of their first year experience.

The recommendations for future African American students included joining student organizations and making their college experience more than attending class and immediately leaving campus for work or home. Each of the participants reflected on the importance of spending time on campus outside of class and the benefits of making social connections on campus that can extend outside of academics. An additional related

recommendation was to emphasize communicating with your professors about any concerns or issues you may be having with the class. One participant reflected that by not asking for help in a math course they were doing themselves a disservice and in the long run not taking full advantage of all of the opportunities afforded to them. Another participant commented on how the extra time spent with a professor during their office hours gave them the confidence to pass an English course they were concerned about failing. Overall the participants stressed that African American freshman should not attempt to take on college alone. They strongly recommend finding and utilizing peers and professors to help with the complex and often confusing world of academia.

### Conclusions

The African American students of this dissertation valued the experiences they had at the institution during their first year. Additionally each of the participants reflected that they felt valued and welcomed by the institution thus making it a comfortable environment to further their education. According to the participants the setting provided optimum conditions for participation and for maximizing opportunities for connectedness to the campus. Throughout the interview and reflection process the participants expressed feeling of empowerment from being asked to contribute to research that is designed to help future students. Additionally, the action taken in doing this dissertation created a sense of pride in both the participants and this researcher.

The first and second dialogues with participants generated many reflections on what it means to successfully complete the first year of college. The participants shared through this research their accomplishments and their failures, in an attempt to identify the critical elements that lead to their eventual persistence and academic success.

Students were candid about their interactions with campus programs, services, faculty and staff. Their reflections provided insight into how they felt personally about their first year experience and how they in retrospect view that year.

Students that participated in this dissertation acknowledged a sense of pride in being selected to participate in this research and hoped that their assessment of the first year could be used to help future students avoid any obstacles they may have faced. Additionally they expressed an appreciation in knowing that this dissertation was designed to explore the experiences of African American students specifically, and was created to assist a specific population of students. Each of the participants plan on completing an associates degree from the institution and three of the students are planning on transferring to a four-year university and continuing their education.

These reflections are based on a variety of unique experiences yet yielded some very consistent themes relating to persistence and achievement. Perceptions of the institution were shared and recommendations for future directions were given in an effort to provide insight into a student population in need of assistance. Although this is a small sample of the African American student population, there are some very strong themes that can be extracted from this research and applied to what I consider a population in need of special attention.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for Future Research

This dissertation captured the experiences of African American community college sophomores about their experiences as freshman. It's recommended that a mixed method, qualitative study follow this dissertation. An expanded qualitative mixed

methods approach could add additional participants to expand the recommendations collected through analysis of the data combined with statistics of completion and retention rates of the college. Questionnaires could be sent to a larger number of African American students after two consecutive semesters at the college in an effort to include the comments of those who did not continue their education. The comments of those who did not choose to continue could be used to evaluate possible deficiencies the college may be facing.

Additionally a longitudinal study could be implemented to track the progression of African American community college students past the second year. A phenomenological approach to tracking the six participants used in this dissertation over an extended period of time and dialoging with them could serve in further evaluating the student's perceptions of their own progress and failures. Lastly, a comparative study could be conducted between two or more colleges in the same region. This could provide college administrators and instructors an opportunity to learn from what is working or not working from similar institutions and share best practices.

#### Recommendations for Professional Practice

This dissertation generated specific recommendations for the institution and for future African American students. Based on this dissertation the institution should encourage faculty to make themselves available to students by becoming active as advisors for student clubs or mentoring students that are current majors in the instructor's discipline. These opportunities to interact with students outside of a lecture or lab setting can be extremely valuable to the overall academic development of African American students as they attend college.

The findings indicate that the connections that African American students make with African American professors can be more influential than connections established with non-African American professors. Therefore it is recommended that the institution support a call to action for African American professors to become more involved in the academic progress of the African American students on campus. Additionally it is recommended that African American faculty and staff increase their visibility on campus and utilize the social capital they hold with African American students as a tool for motivation and inspiration.

Furthermore it is recommended that the institution continue to promote and grow its efforts in student services. There is an opportunity for the campus to improve in the areas of open lab hours and open library hours. Participants reflected that the access was vital to their first year academic success and their only concern was the limited hours of operation of these essential programs. The institution should also consider its current strategy for the promotion of student services and evaluate its social networking potential on the World Wide Web.

The research generated recommendations for future African American students. These recommendations included becoming involved in campus organizations or services early in your academic career. The social support generated through participation clearly assisted the participants in their transition to college and provided them with a support system of other college students to share and compare experiences. Additionally this research suggests that African American students should make an effort to connect with their professors outside of lecture through utilizing office hours or joining student government. The benefits associated with developing a connection to the campus



included a better understanding of course curriculum and opportunities to gain insight into community college culture and practices.

### Summary

In summary this research recommends that the college continue its efforts in establishing an environment that simulates the mental and social growth of African American students as they attend college directly out of high school. Through well structured student support services and committed faculty and staff. The institution serves as a gateway for many African American students that are seeking transfer to a four-year institution or professional training for employment. With effective and committed educators and continued opportunities for student support services the institution can continue to promote a culturally competent and intellectually progressive environment for African American students as they attempt to excel in higher education in search of equality and opportunity.

### Reflections of the Researcher

My experiences as an African American student and educator have informed my desire to research African American student trends and obstacles in higher education. As a first year college student I earned a cumulative 1.13 grade point average because I was not prepared with the tools or mind set to effectively participate in the higher education experience. The life lessons learned during that first year have informed my approach to learning throughout my undergraduate and graduate education. Most recently that experience has served to provide motivation and inspiration for the development of this research on the African American first year student experience.

My career as an educator has spanned the k-12, community college and university levels. I ventured into the field of education from a legacy of teachers and administrators and knew from early on that I wanted to serve my community and provide inspiration to students of color who were seeking to excel academically and experience college life. I take great pride in my everyday work as a professor and believe that my daily contact with students provides motivation for academic success and a support system for students needing assistance during their college experience.

This dissertation has shown that there are external factors that can contribute to the academic success of African American students and that with support systems in place even students who assess in the lowest percentiles can exceed their own expectations as college students. As a community college faculty member it's my responsibility to my students to make available reasonable tools for success and to do everything in my power to ensure that they are informed of all of the programs and services afforded to them as students of the California community college system.

Knowing that I was neither the first, nor that last African American student to struggle academically during the first semester, this research seeks to create new opportunities for higher education institutions to take a proactive role in the cultivation and support of young African American scholars. We are at a critical junction as a state seeking to increase the percentages of highly trained and highly educated citizens and I believe that an intervention is needed to insure that California's African American students are not overlooked in the efforts to advance these objectives. This research seeks to demystify the African American first year experience and provide insight and understanding to a population in critical need of support.

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APPENDIX A  
IRBPHS Initial Application

## APPENDIX A

## IRBPHS Initial Application

**IRBPHS INITIAL APPLICATION****Name of Applicant:** Robert Snowden Jr**USF Identification Number:** 10163048**University Title:** The University of San Francisco**School or College:** School of Education**Department or Group:** International and Multicultural Education**Home or Campus Address:**5616 Birdview Way  
Elk grove, CA 95757**Home Phone:** 916-548-2512**Work Phone:** 916-691-7666**Electronic Mail Address(s):** [snowden76@gmail.com](mailto:snowden76@gmail.com), rlsnowden@dons.usfca.edu**Name(s) and University Title(s) of Other Investigators:****Name of Faculty Advisor:** Dr. Betty Taylor**University Title:** Professor**Home or Campus Address:**School of Education  
Department of International and Multicultural Education  
Office: SOE, Room 220  
San Francisco, CA 94117**Home or Campus Phone:** (415) 422-6041**Electronic Mail Address(s):** taylorb@usfca.edu

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**Signature of Applicant Date**

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**Signature of Faculty Advisor\* Date**

\*Your signature indicates that you accept responsibility for the research described, including work by students under your supervision.

It further attests that you are fully aware of all procedures to be followed, will monitor the research, and will notify the IRPBHS of any significant problems or changes.

**Project Title:** CRITICAL REFLECTIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS ABOUT FACTORS LEADING TO SCHOLASTIC SUCCESS DURING THEIR FIRST YEAR

*Respond to items 1 - 11 white paper, single-sided, typed in black ink and using standard 12 point font.*

*Responses to items 1-11 should be stapled to this Initial Application form.*

African American students are facing challenges in matriculating from high school in to institutions of higher education within the state of California. Systematically, the high percentage of African American students that are educated in California's low or underperforming schools leads to a direct correlation to the dismal numbers of African American students that arrive adequately prepared for the academic rigors of higher education. The issues with education are vast and without intervention students of color will continue to fail in successfully navigating the requirements of colleges and universities. Within the state of California an increasing diverse population is eventually going to force institutions in of higher learning to address the problems associated historically underperforming populations.

The California Community College (CCC) system currently serves the most diverse population in its history. Unfortunately African American students attending the community colleges of the state are facing overwhelming social and academic challenges and are consequently failing to achieve proportionate graduation and transfers rates compared to other populations statewide. There are a variety of challenges facing institutions that both in theory and practice seek to establish equity between marginalized populations without limiting the opportunities for other groups. As the CCC system continues to grow steps must be taken to institutionalize methods that consistently address issues associated with multicultural education. Despite the fact the CCC system has traditionally been a valued part of the collegial matriculation process for millions of students, yet with fewer and fewer African Americans successfully navigating the system current educational trends will undoubtedly continue.

To date a noteworthy amount of research has been conducted on African American student success strategies and the first year experience of college students independently. What remains to be explored are the critical reflections and experiences of first year African American CCC students about their persistence, progress towards degree/certificate completion, transfer preparation and their use of student services resources. This work is extremely relevant considering the current trends in education that are perpetuating educational inequality among students of color.

The purpose of this study is to explore through the reflections of students the factors that lead to African American community college freshman persistence. This study will: 1) examine college programs or services that were available to or utilized by the student during the first year and, 2) explore the recommendations of African American college sophomores for incoming African American first semester students. For the purpose of this study student persistence will be defined as continued attendance and unit completion from the semester of first enrollment through two consecutive semesters as a full time student according to number of units attempted and completed. Limiting the study to a northern California urban/suburban community college expands upon previous research on freshman success, African American college student success, and African American students in the California community college system.

This study will examine the experiences of African American students at Cosumnes River College in Sacramento California who have completed their first year of academic courses. The significance of this study is embedded within a focus on a segment of the community college student body that has been identified by the college as suffering from poor matriculation and persistence rates. This researcher's intention is that the information gathered from the students' reflections, can lead to the overall enhancement of efforts to retain and support African American college freshmen. This research will serve the campus by informing administrators on student perspectives in relation to their own education and subsequently motivating administrators and faculty to consider reasonable improvements to the current college infrastructure.

Though community colleges can serve as gateways to higher education, they can also work to the benefit of four-year institutions as gatekeepers (Dowd, 2007). As a gatekeeper many undergraduate students seeking transfer are locked into completing their entire lower division course work at the community college before they can be admitted to the four-year of their choice. Despite a growing number of students enrolling in community colleges and the systems ability to assist in transfer to four-year institutions, the current organization of community colleges is providing both a democratization and diversion effect on its student population. Current research supports the concept that the United States is facing a crisis in regards to the scholastic preparedness of African American students (Hefner, 2004). African American students specifically in the state of California unfortunately continue to struggle in achieving their transfer goals and improving their rates of matriculation. Therefore it becomes critical that community colleges take a proactive role in supporting this marginalized population in the attainment of their educational goals.

## **2. Description of Sample**

This researcher proposes to invite six African American students to share reflections on their experiences as first year community college students and serve as active participants in the improvement of institutional programs and services. Subjects selected for this study will have met the following criteria: (1) Currently enrolled as a 2<sup>nd</sup> year student at Cosumnes River College (2) Will have completed at least 24 units of academic

coursework at Cosumnes River College by the Fall 2008 semester (3) Are in good academic standing:

- a. Subjects will be current students at Cosumnes River College.
- b. The selected participants have been at their respective school at least one year and have successfully matriculated to a second year student status in good academic standing.
- c. Applicant has obtained access to subjects through employment in the Los Rios Community College District
- d. Subjects will not be interviewed as part of any course or some other type of captive capacity.

### **3. Recruitment Procedure**

- a. Faculty members at Cosumnes River College who teach intermediate or second year curriculum will be asked by the applicant through an email (Appendix F) to disseminate a letter (Appendix E) to their African American students. The letter introduces the project and states that if the students fit the described selection criteria and if they are willing to participate that they are invited to contact the researcher in order to set up an informational meeting. This recruitment process has been proposed so that the researcher can deliberately gather representation of the African American student population from across multiple academic disciplines.
- b. An email will invite self-selected participants to an informational session at an off campus location to further explain the study. At that time potential participants will be offered a consent form and a questionnaire designed to gather information about their first year experience.

### **4. Subject Consent Process**

- a. No parental consent is necessary; the subject is over 18 years of age.
- b. The project will involve two face-to-face interviews between the applicant and the subjects.
- c. The project will include a short invitation letter attached (Appendix E)
- d. Project does not involve simultaneous administration of a survey or questionnaire to a large group of subjects.
- e. Not applicable.
- f. Consent form that will be used is from the University of San Francisco's IRBPHS Appendix B.

### **5. Procedures**

- a. Subject's transcripts will be observed to verify that they are current students at Cosumnes River College and that they have completed two consecutive semesters between Fall 2007 and Fall 2008

- b. Subjects will be provided a short letter, questionnaire and informed consent form.
- c. Subjects will return a signed copy of consent form.
- d. Subjects will be sent up a time for the first and second interview to be held at a local off campus location.
- e. Questionnaire will be collected on the day of the interview.
- f. Subjects will participate in 2 face-to-face interviews.
- g. Interviews will be transcribed by applicant after each session.
- h. Transcriptions will be sent to subjects to review for accuracy.

## **6. Potential Risks to Subjects**

There may be some emotional discomfort as participants share some of their personal and educational experiences. Subjects may also be concerned about the confidentiality of their identities when asked about their experiences as students.

## **7. Minimization of Potential Risk**

In an effort to provide protection to the subjects, participants will select pseudonyms for themselves to be identified by in interviews and in the reporting of the data. Moreover the researcher will apply a pseudonym for every instructor, manager or staff member identified in the interview sessions. Lastly the institution will not be directly identified and by holding the interviews in a local off campus location the subjects are further assured an anonymous experience.

The researcher will attempt to minimize stress or discomfort to the participant by making the interview environment a conference or meeting room off campus but within close proximity to the college. Additionally the questionnaire will be coded for record keeping purposes and remain confidential. The applicant has chosen to conduct two interview sessions. The first one will obtain information and the second will be used for clarification of information obtained in the first session.

## **8. Potential Benefits to Subjects**

Subjects may gain personal self-awareness and empowerment knowing that they were co-researchers on a body of knowledge that will be available for others to read and learn from. The anticipated result is to inform best practices of California Community Colleges in the implementation of programs and courses designed to assist first time freshman in attaining their academic goals. The academic community can benefit from this research by applying its findings in the development of curriculum that prepares first time freshman with the tools necessary for scholastic achievement and matriculation through higher education.

## **9. Costs to Subjects**

There are no anticipated costs to the participants of this study other than the time provided for the interviews. Each interview will be approximately one-half hour to one hour in length. There may also be additional time required of subjects to read and verify their transcripts. The researcher will encourage participants to meet in a place that is convenient to them.

#### **10. Reimbursements/Compensation to Subjects**

No reimbursements will be involved in the procedures, as there will be no monetary cost to the participants of this study. Additionally, no compensation will be given to participants. Participants will be made aware of these stipulations through consent.

#### **11. Confidentiality of Records**

The transcripts and audio tape of the interviews from this project will be kept under lock and key at Cosumnes River College Room L-101, 8401 Center Parkway, Sacramento, CA 95823 for approximately 1 year after the project has been completed then the material will be shredded and destroyed.

APPENDIX B

Los Rios Community College District research Approval Letter



**LOS RIOS COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT  
REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH ABOUT LRCCD STUDENTS AND/OR COLLEGES**

**Research Proposal Cover Sheet**

*(Please type directly onto this form, save to your computer and e-mail to the appropriate office.)* Date submitted: 09/29/2008

Principal Investigator: Robert Snowden Title: Professor of Radio and New Media  
 Title of Project: Critical Reflections of African American Community College Students: Factors Leading to Scholastic Success  
 Home Address: 5616 Birdview Way Home Phone: (916) 548-2512  
 Email Address: snowden76@gmail.com  
 LRCCD Employees: College: Cosumnes Work Phone: (916) 691-7666  
 External Lead Researcher: College/University/Organization: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Program of Study: \_\_\_\_\_ Faculty advisor: \_\_\_\_\_

**Individual/Group Responsible for Study Oversight Approval (if appropriate):**

Principal Investigator's Faculty Advisor **OR** Department Chair **OR** Professional Standards Committee:  
 Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Names/titles of additional investigators: \_\_\_\_\_

Implications for LRCCD College or District Resources (use of space, use of college data, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

**History of this proposed study:**

New  Modification \_\_\_\_\_ Renewal \_\_\_\_\_

If it is a Modification or Renewal, does this submission differ in any way from the previously approved proposal?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, describe any differences in your proposed research.

**Attach the Following:**

- A research proposal abstract that defines your study: summary of the study, including its purpose and background; methods section; subjects required (number, source/recruitment procedures, criteria for inclusions/exclusions, etc.); name(s), academic background and experience of investigators; detailed description of data to be extracted from student records (where appropriate); copy of survey instrument (where appropriate); copy of interview protocol (where appropriate).
- Copy of university/agency research approval, including approved guidelines for human subjects in the research (where appropriate)
- Consent form for participants (if consent from participants is needed to conduct the research)
- Draft survey instrument and/or interview protocol

Approved  Not Approved \_\_\_\_\_ Signature *[Signature]* Date 10/23/08  
 see attached email

APPENDIX C

Student Invitation Letter

APPENDIX C  
Student Invitation Letter

September 30, 2008

Dear Cosumnes River College Student,

My name is Robert Snowden and I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. I am conducting a study on the experiences of second year African American students at Cosumnes River College (CRC). You were selected to receive this invitation because college faculty members recommend you based on their knowledge of your academic history. Please consider participating in this study if you meet the following criteria: You are a 18-20 years old, an African American student at CRC, this is your second consecutive year at CRC, you have completed at least 24 units, you are currently a fulltime student and lastly that you are in good academic standing.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to provide an unofficial copy of your transcript and you will be interviewed on two separate occasions, at a place and time convenient for you. If you were to feel uncomfortable in answering any of the questions or performing any of the tasks within this study, you would be free to decline or stop at any time. All study information will be kept in locked files at all times. Only study personnel will have access to the files. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from this study.

The anticipated benefit of this work will be in informing best practices of California Community Colleges in the implementation of programs and courses designed to assist first time freshman in attaining their academic goals. There would be no cost to you as a result of taking part in this study, nor would you be reimbursed for your participation in this study. Lastly, if you meet the criteria and are not selected to participate in the study thank you in advance for your time and energy.

If you have questions about the research, or if you believe that you would like to participate you may contact me at [snowden76@gmail.com](mailto:snowden76@gmail.com) or at (916) 548-2512. If you have further questions about the study, you may contact the IRBPHS at the University of San Francisco, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. You may reach the IRBPHS office by phoning (415) 422-6091 and leaving a voicemail message, by e-mailing mailing [IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu), or by writing to the IRBPHS, Department of Psychology, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080.

Sincerely,

Robert Snowden  
Doctoral Student  
University of San Francisco

APPENDIX D

Letter to College Faculty

## APPENDIX D

## Draft Letter to College Faculty

September 30, 2008

Dear Colleague:

As you know I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. I am conducting a study on the experiences of second year African American students at Cosumnes River College (CRC). I am requesting your assistance in helping me generate a sample of students that meet specific criteria for participation in this study. If you would as by disseminating the attached letter (Appendix E) to students that you identify as second year African American's between the ages of 18-20. If the identified student agrees to participate in the study the letter instructs them on how to contact me via email at [snowden76@gmail.com](mailto:snowden76@gmail.com) or by phone at 916-548-2512.

Thank you for you assistance,

Robert Snowden  
Doctoral Student  
University of San Francisco

APPENDIX E

Release Form for Tapes and Transcripts

## APPENDIX E

## Release Form for Tapes and Transcripts

I agree to have my dialogues with Robert Snowden audio taped and transcribed into written form. I realize that it is the responsibility of both Mr. Snowden and myself to ensure the accuracy of these transcriptions.

I am also aware that the original audio tapes and transcripts will be kept safe and secure in the office of Mr. Snowden at Cosumnes River College at 8401 Center Parkway, Sacramento, CA 95823 for period of one year, after which they will be destroyed. The transcribed copies I receive will be destroyed or not at my discretion.

Subject Signature\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX F

Interview Protocol – Dialogue Questions



## APPENDIX F

## Interview Protocol – Dialogue Questions

The qualitative study proposes to inquire into three primary questions:

1. What factors led to the persistence of African American students during their first year at a California community college?
2. Have college generated programs or services impacted the success of African American students during the first year at a California community college?
3. What recommendations do current African American students have for the institution and future African American first year California community college students?

**The areas of interest for the interview protocol questions is as follows:**

1. Please describe yourself, where are you from what are your interests and goals.
  - a. Please describe how you came to the decision to attend community college, and what where the factors that led to your choice in Cosumnes River College?
  - b. What were some of your success and failures during your first year?
  - c. Please describe your experiences with college faculty, administrators or staff during your first year.
  - d. Please describe your first semester as a student at Cosumnes River College.
2. Please describe any opportunities you had to utilize campus services or facilities.
  - a. What were your expectations from the college in regards to services provided and your overall student experience?

- b. Please describe your experiences with using technology for school related activities during your first year.
  - c. Please describe your perceptions on the availability of campus services specifically for the social or academic support of African American students at Cosumnes River College.
  - d. Please describe your social interactions while on campus during your first year at Cosumnes River College.
  - e. Please describe your overall academic performance during your first year at Cosumnes River College.
3. Please describe what you feel the institution and future freshman could learn from your experiences as a first year community college student.
- a. What helped you successfully complete your full first year at Cosumnes River College?
  - b. As an African American student did you at any point during your freshman year feel excluded or not apart of the campus culture?
  - c. What recommendations would you give to the institution to further assist African American students in achieving their academic goals?

APPENDIX G

Informed Consent Letter

## Appendix B

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO  
CONSENT TO BE A RESEARCH SUBJECT

## Purpose and Background

1. Robert Snowden, a graduate student in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco is conducting a study on the first year experience of African American students at a California Community College

I am being asked to participate because I am second year African American student between the ages of 18-20 at a California Community College

If I agree to be a participant in this study, the following will happen:

- 1) I will complete a short questionnaire my first year experience.
- 2) I will participate in an interview with the researcher, during which time I will be asked about my experiences as a first time freshman.

I will complete the questionnaire and participate in the interview at a place of my own convenience.

## Risks and/or Discomforts

1. I am free to decline to answer any questions that I do not wish to answer or that make me feel uncomfortable.
2. Confidentiality will be maintained as I participate in the study. Records will be kept confidential and no individual identities will be used in any reports or publications resulting from this study. Study information will be kept in locked files at all times.

## Benefits

There will be no direct benefit to me from participating in this study. The anticipated benefit of this study is a better understanding of the effects of leadership styles and behaviors on student academic performance.

## Cost/Financial Considerations

There will be no financial costs to me as a result of taking part in this study.

### Payment/Reimbursement

I will not be paid for my participation in this study.

### Questions

I have talked Robert Snowden about this study and have had my questions answered. If I have further questions about the study, I may contact him at (916) 691-7666.

If I have any questions or comments about participation in this study, I should first talk to the researcher. If for some reason I do not wish to do this, I may contact the IRBPHS which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the IRBPHS office by calling (415) 422-6091 and leaving a voicemail message, by e-mailing [IRBPHS@usfca.edu](mailto:IRBPHS@usfca.edu), or by writing to the IRBPHS, Department of Psychology, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117-1080.

### Consent

I have been given a copy of the “Research Subject’s Bill of Rights” and I have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

**PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY.** I am free to decline to be in this study, or to withdraw from it at any point. My decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on my present or future status as an employee with my employer. My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this study.

Subject’s Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Signature \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX H

Demographic Questionnaire

## Demographic Questionnaire

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Sex \_\_\_\_\_

1. Current Major:
2. Please list your cumulative G.P.A after your first year at the institution:
3. Did you have a job during your freshman year? If so where and how many hours did you work?
4. During your first year were you involved in any campus activities or organizations? If so please list.
5. Name of High School you graduated from. City and State
6. Please list your career goals and objectives:
7. Please state the highest education level of your mother and father:
8. Please list any additional information you would like to share about your self or your experiences at the college: