Contributing Factors to Persistence among African-American and Hispanic Students in Higher Education: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study at a Diverse Small Institution on the East Coast

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Abstract

The purpose for this phenomenological study is to understand the persistence of academically successful African-American and Hispanic students in an ethnically diverse higher education context where services and support targeting minority students do not formally exist. The research for this study has been conducted on campuses where the student body demographics are largely mono-ethnic. It would seem that as institutions of higher education become increasingly diverse, contributing factors to success for students of color may change. Themes that emerged include having a spiritual perspective, having a sense of purpose or the big picture, having support from family, having support from the individuals within the institution, and having self-motivation.

With the increasingly competitive nature of higher education and the need for a higher education degree in the marketplace, there is an expectation that academic institutions will address student persistence as well as equal opportunity for success among all students. However, there remains in higher education a certain inequality, especially when considering student persistence and the unique needs of minority students in higher education (Jost, Whitfield, & Jost, 2005). While there may be a variety of reasons for such a reality, recent research and development addressing student persistence among minority students helps to address the issue.

Student Persistence

Student persistence among college students is not a new concept to the higher education community. Formational contributions to this field include Tinto's (1975; 1982) modeling of retention and Astin's (1984) work on the importance of the educational environment to academic persistence and achievement. Following such work, Chickering and Gamson (1987), Tinto (1993a, 1993b), and others further developed success principles for institutions of higher education that address needs related to student persistence (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Sulaiman & Mohezar, 2006). The most significant factor of student persistence according to Jost, Whitfield, & Jost (2005) is the role that a student's ethnic background has on their persistence in higher education.

When considering the effect that a person's ethnicity may have on their persistence in higher education, several key variables are involved (Renner & Moore, 2004). Allen, Epps, and Haniff (1991) performed groundbreaking research as they began to address the differences between persistence in Caucasian and African-American students. The research revealed a number of variables connecting ethnicity with student persistence. Further research revealed that "white cultural norms" (D'Souza, 1991), such as a greater

emphasis on the individual outcome rather than the collective (Ellison & Boykin, 1994), may produce hurdles for students of different ethnic backgrounds. In fact, ignoring this reality creates a kind of segregation, especially for African-American and Hispanic students (D'Souza, 1991; Kuo & Miller, 2004; Renner & Moore, 2004).

Obstacles for African-American Students

There are several factors that have been researched regarding the persistence of African-Americans in higher education. One factor has been described as a need for social support and well being (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1992). Reasons for this may include the potential for greater self-esteem or self-confidence and an ethnic norm of cooperative rather than individualistic learning (Ellison & Boykin, 1994; Campbell & Fleming, 2000; Demo & Parker, 1987). Other factors include the years leading up to college (Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, Roberts, & Fulmore,1994) and the financial burden involved (Fleming, 1978; Mason, 1998; St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005; Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, Roberts, & Fulmore,1994).

Consequently, specific challenges include experiences of discrimination, (Taylor et al., 1994), a "negative cognitive disadvantage" (Tinto, 1993) and the tensions between doing well academically and simply affording the opportunity (Upthegrove, Roscigno, & Charles, 1999). It has been demonstrated that high achieving African-American students rely on "multiple motivational factors such as intrinsic, extrinsic, present, future, and social goals" (Hwang, Echols, & Vrongistinos 2002, p.551) in order to succeed. Although not a new concept to those studying motivational theory, this does demonstrate that the current scenario in higher education reflects a certain level of hope for the motivated. Nevertheless, higher education maintains inequalities that must be overcome by African-American students (Flowers & Pascarella, 1999; Hwang et al., 2002).

Obstacles for Hispanic Students

Hispanic students also face obstacles in higher education. A 1945 court case in California (*Mendez v. Westminster School District*) was a groundbreaking case that opened the door for their access to schooling in the US, and eventually the formation of Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005). Hispanic students share some of the same struggles as African-American students. One such example is the financial implications of going to college (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005). Furthermore, financial constraints are closely associated with poor academic preparation before coming to college (Marwick, 2004).

However, academic success for Hispanic students is also closely associated with support from a very family oriented community and culture (Benitez & DeAro, 2004). Because leaving home and the family is not part of convention in Hispanic culture (Benitez & DeAro, 2004), Hispanic students tend to enroll at a community college because it fits their cultural context better. It is less expensive, more flexible, and more conducive to a family oriented support structure (Cejda & Rhodes, 2004; Gonzales Jovel, & Stoner, 2004; Martinez & Fernandez, 2004).

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The Headway Made by Programs, Services and Centers

In light of the challenges facing African-American and Hispanic students in higher education, there have been some significant developments in programs, services and centers that help increase student persistence. These efforts include dealing with issues associated with being a first-generation college student (Bridges, Barbara, Kuh, & Leegwater, 2005), facilitating contact and support between faculty, staff, and students, and increased communication regarding shared responsibility for each student's success (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004). Other services include focused attention on the first year adjustment for minority students as they learn to adapt and succeed from within their own cultural context (Bridges *et al.*, 2005; Wycoff, 1996) and facilitating the transfer of minority students to four-year institutions to allow them to finish a bachelor's degree (Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, Morphew, & Sopcich, 2004).

Beyond such efforts, the initiatives have been centered around creating scholarship opportunities to help mitigate the cost of higher education (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005). In addition, efforts have been made to create an environment that seeks to foster "confidence, motivation, high aspirations, and the ability to thrive in competition"(Bridges *et al.*, 2005). Services related to overcoming the educational gap for incoming students and programs that involve the whole family have also been an area of much growth (Benitez & DeAro, 2004; Bridges *et al.*, 2005; Hagedorn & Cepeda, 2004).

Method

The purpose for this study is to understand the persistence of African-American and Hispanic students in an ethnically diverse higher education context where services that target students of color, such as a multicultural services office or culture-specific centers or clubs, do not formally exist. The participants for this study are all students at a small four-year private religious college and seminary in the Washington D.C. area. The school is non-denominational and the enrollment is below 450 full-time equivalence (FTE). The diversity in the student body has become an important part of the schools identity; however, the diversity in the student body did not appear to happen due to an intentional effort.

In the spring of 2008, 44% of the college student body was African-American and 37% was Caucasian. Ten percent of the student body was identified as Asian and the Hispanic/Latino population, which has historically not been represented in the student body, has now grown to over 3%. While the student body is diverse, the institution does not offer any services specifically directed at minority students, nor are there any staff devoted to minority student affairs. Furthermore, the faculty and staff have traditionally been predominantly Caucasian. A shift towards a more diverse faculty and staff has begun within the last three to four years. Within this population there are numerous students who are persisting towards their educational goals, yet without the formal support that the literature suggests is critical.

In order to explore factors of success among minority students in such a context, a qualitative phenomenological study was conducted using a convenience sample (Creswell, 1998). This method was chosen in order to capture the students who classified themselves as either African-American or Hispanic, sustained a 3.5 GPA or higher, were actively involved in student life, and had schedules conducive to gathering

input through interviews. The research was passed through an Institutional Review Board and each participant signed an informed consent form prior to the interview.

The sample consists of four African-American and four Hispanic students. Four are male students, of which one is a resident student, and four are female, of whom all are resident students. One of the eight is a graduate student while the other seven are undergraduate students. Of the students interviewed, only two have exclusively attended the four-year college chosen for this study. Several of the students had experiences at HBCUs, HSIs, and various programs offered at other colleges and universities to help minority students. Pseudonyms were selected for all participants.

Female Participants

Maria is a Hispanic female and a resident student. She had previously attended a community college and is now a sophomore. She is single, intent on completing her degree and has studied at the four-year college chosen for this study for one semester.

Valerie is female and half African-American and half Mexican. She is in her early twenties and is single. She is classified as a junior and currently serves as a resident assistant in one of the residence halls. She has not attended any other institutions of higher education apart from the four-year college chosen for this study.

Anna is an African-American female who began her higher education experience at an HBCU. After a year she transferred to the four-year college chosen for this study. She is single, a resident student, and currently classified as a junior.

Dani is an African-American female who has solely attended the four-year college chosen for this study. She is currently a senior and also serves as the president of the student government association. She is single, in her early twenties, a resident student, and plans to graduate this coming May.

Male Participants

Chris is a male in his thirties, and a commuter student. He is African-American and had previously attended a community college. He is a husband and a father and currently considered a senior by his credit hours. He has studied at the four-year college in question for more than five semesters on a part-time basis.

Julio is a male commuter student in his twenties. He is Hispanic and he attended a community college for one year prior to transferring into the four-year college in this study. He is single, a full-time student and lives with his uncles not far from the campus.

Hugo is a male resident Hispanic student. His family lives in the Midwest and he has solely attended the four-year college chosen for this study. He is currently a senior and will be graduating in May. He is single and in his early twenties.

Denzel is a male commuter student in his mid-twenties. He is African-American, a graduate of the four-year college in this study and has continued on to graduate school at the same institution. His experience in higher education includes a year at a large state school in the Midwest. He is engaged to be married this coming spring and hopes to finish a master's degree and then go on for a doctorate.

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Interview Protocol

The interview protocol consisted of 10 questions that were developed from a review of the literature on minority student affairs. While seven questions were asked of all participants, the last three questions were different depending on whether the participant was African-American or Hispanic. This was done in an attempt to further probe the ethnic differences that the literature identifies. The questions asked were designed to gain an understanding of persistence in the absence of formalized minority services in higher education. The seven questions that were asked of all participants were as follows:

1. Racially inequality has been suggested by some as obvious and clear. Have you experienced inequality in higher education overall and here at this institution? Please explain.
2. Student success seems connected to the relationship between students and the faculty. Can you describe for me any key aspects of this connection that contribute to your persistence (or lack thereof if it applies)?
3. Do you sense that there are others that fight for your success here or do you feel left to your own in this process? (Respondents were asked for examples.)
4. Do you think our context here at [the school studied] offers you confidence, motivation, and/or high aspirations? Or have you found these components elsewhere during your study? Please explain.
5. Do you feel your ethnic background or race has been an issue in any of the following areas:
   a. Cooperation among students?
   b. Active learning?
   c. Prompt feedback?
   d. Time on task?
   e. High expectations?
   f. Respect for diverse talents and ways of learning (Chickering and Gamson, 1987)?

   (Respondents were asked to give factors for persistence in areas that were identified as problematic.)
6. The literature suggests that factors such as lower income, being academically disadvantaged, or being a first-generation student are obstacles for minority students in higher education. What has been your experience in regard to these issues? (Respondents were asked for examples where appropriate and also asked for factors of persistence in overcoming any of the challenges mentioned.)
7. Do you consider your experience here at [the institution studied] to be monocultural, mainstream view or based on Eurocentric norms? What supports your persistence in such an environment?

After the seven core questions were asked, the following three questions were asked of African-American students:

8. Can you describe for me any pressure from your family to succeed or pull out?
9. Have you found that you benefit more from collaborative learning? Do you find your context here to be predominantly collaborative or individualistic?
10. Do you resonate with the concept of the "glass ceiling," and if so, have you found it to affect your willingness to persist?

The final three questions that were asked of Hispanic students are as follows:

11. Can you name any mentors that you have relied upon during your time here?
12. What kind of support do you muster from family? If no support, what factors contribute to your persistence?
13. Several institutions have sought to support Hispanic students through programs such as Puente Projects or Clubs. In lieu of such programs or services, what factors lead to your persistence?

As the interviewer I have had personal contact with each of the participants over this past semester. I serve as the dean of students and adjunct professor at the institution chosen for this study and therefore hold a position of power on campus. My personal bias is further shaped by having grown up in Europe.

Limitations
There are limitations to this study. As a phenomenological qualitative project, the principles are not directly transferable to other institutions. The participants reflect a convenience sample, and not a sample that is necessarily a reflection of the make-up of the student body. For example, only one of the students interviewed reflects the average age of the student body. Finally, a Caucasian male with a position of power and personal bias conducted the interviews. Having an interviewer that reflected the ethnicity of the participants may have yielded further insights. Comparing the results with Caucasian students is a possible future project.

Results
Introduction
In searching for characteristics of persistence among African-American and Hispanic students at a diverse four-year educational institution where no formal office or staff members are devoted to minority student affairs, a series of personal one-on-one interviews were conducted at a small four-year private religious college and seminary in the Washington D.C. area. Following the eight student interviews, the information was transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes in regard to characteristics of student persistence. The coding and analyzing was done using QSR NVIVO Version 7.

The transcriptions were reviewed multiple times, with the coding process involved identifying main ideas and points related to the subject of interest. As some codes developed and became more common, they were labeled as themes. The themes that emerged included: having a spiritual perspective, having a sense of purpose or the big picture, having support from family, having support from the individuals within the institution, and having self-motivation.

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Spiritual Perspective

In discussing factors that contribute to student persistence, the coding process revealed two aspects of the resulting theme. These factors, or sub-themes, reflect the topics that were explicitly mentioned by at least four different participants.

Faith in God and His work. When asked about student persistence in lieu of formal services and staff, all but one of the interviewees referenced a level of faith in God and His work. Denzel graduated from the undergraduate school and is currently attending the graduate school of the institution studied. He also had experiences as a student at a large state school in the Midwest. When asked about persistence, he noted:

> Minorities at [this school] are going to persist because even though there are no minority services, they're going to persist because they want to know God. They want to study God's Word and what motivates them is bigger than race, it's bigger than being served.

Valerie, whose ethnic background is half African-American and half Mexican and whose experience is solely at the institution studied, described a similar perspective. When asked how she persisted through some of her challenges, she recalled:

> Knowing that God would not have allowed me to get to this point if He didn't want me to complete it. And that is always what I have to remember myself. Remind myself, because higher education is a lot harder for me… each time I get to those points I just have to say: Why would God bring me to school? Why would I be in my Junior year of college if I wasn't made to finish it? So just suck it up, dry your tears, say a couple of prayers and get 15 minutes of sleep and get it done.

Maria, when asked of her persistence, quickly concluded: "I think it's really, really just God, because you really can't…nobody can help you more than God. That's the way I look at it."

Of the minority student studied, Hugo is the farthest from what he considers home. When thinking through tough times that he weathered at the institution, he was asked why he persisted. He responded: "What kept me here was, umm, just seeing the opportunities God opened up for me here, while being here…I think that's the main reason why I'm here and not like at [another school] or something." For these students, their reliance on God was a recurring factor to their persistence.

Sense of calling. Closely associated with faith in God was discussion that centered on a sense of calling. Four of the eight minority students interviewed talked about how important their sense of calling was to their persistence. Anna, an African-American undergraduate student who began her experience in higher education at an HBCU, is a student who leans heavily on her sense of calling. When asked about her confidence level, she quipped: "I knew I was supposed to be here, so the confidence was a given."

Julio, a Hispanic student who started his higher education experience at a community college in southern California, described how important his sense of calling is to his persistence. "There's a very specific calling that I feel, and I know I need training. And as my time has gone, as I've gone through this, my years here, I keep feeling that, yeah, I

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am receiving the training. I'm getting what I really need."

Faith in God and a sense of calling were the contributors to the theme of having a spiritual perspective. This was the most dominant theme that emerged in this study.

Sense of Purpose and the Big Picture

While having a spiritual perspective was a key to persistence for the students interviewed, there was a close association to a sense of purpose and big picture as well. These were mentioned as a separate theme, yet discussions about purpose were always closely associated with a spiritual perspective, and frequently these themes were intermixed.

Sense of purpose. Julio, for example, described how important his purpose was, and yet in the context of his comments he closely associated his sense of purpose with his sense of calling. In regard to his purpose, and its role in his persistence, he noted:

> So, like, I don't know, I talked to some people, and it's, you know, "What do you want to do with your degree?" You know? They just come 'cause that's what they were supposed to do after they finished high school. Where me, I made a very specific choice. I need to come here because I need training for this specific goal. So that's my constant motivation, that I want to go into the pastorate. So every year I feel, yeah, what I'm receiving here, it's preparing me for that. And that just affirms even more that this is where I need to be, and I need to be receiving what I'm learning… Well, just, like, I had said that, you know, that I had a purpose when I got here, and I felt the school has been training me, and so that's why I want to persist.

Chris echoed Julio's comments. He noted: "for me it's just personal goals that's keeping me driving." Later in the interview he clarified by adding: "And I guess my setting of why I'm doing it: for ministry to minister to inner city kids, I just need what I can get and you know, get it as fast as I can and go."

For Hugo, his sense of purpose and calling not only contribute to his persistence in higher education, but also to his career goals. When asked to explain his thoughts on these issues, he stated:

> Just knowing that I want to get into journalism, sports journalism, and there aren't a lot of, the numbers aren't very high for you know Hispanic male you know sports writers, reporters and stuff like that. It's kind of like, you know, you want to do certain things for your own personal desires…

Having a sense of purpose was expressed frequently as an important factor of persistence to the students interviewed.

Sense of the big picture. Valerie and Hugo described the importance of "the big picture" in similar terms as others described their sense of purpose. When asked about persistence in the face of inequalities and division, Valerie gave one such example.

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I guess I just realize that things aren't, it's just not that big of a deal. You know like, it's not going to cause me to not graduate or not be successful in my future, so just don't harp on it.
Interviewer: So the big picture becomes critical?
Valerie: Yeah.

Hugo, simply summed it up as: "…it's really a bigger picture, it's not just ourselves it's bigger."

Supporting Relationships

Having supporting relationships was found to be another theme that emerged. Minority students talked about such support in terms of two factors: support from family and being a role model. Within these factors, there is some overlap.

Support from family. Support from family members was a prominent theme related to student persistence. For some, it was a general reference to their upbringing and preparation for life and college. Denzel is one such example. When asked whether he ever felt like just giving up on overcoming the challenges, he said:

So, my mother instilled in us kind of an opposite to that sort of throw your hands up, instead of just throw your hands up, she said, "OK, you guys are just going to have to work harder in school because the perception is that it'll be harder for you," so she pushed us harder in school or she made us speak properly at home and that sort of thing, so I can't resonate with it and say that I'm just going to give up.

Dani shared a similar experience. She recalled: "I've always felt fairly optimistic because my parents, you know pretty much, you know your talents, develop them, always do your best…."

Others described the importance of family, but for other reasons. Julio described a much more active level of support from his family as is demonstrated from the following excerpt from his interview:

Interviewer: You mentioned earlier that you came here and you've got your uncle…
Julio: Yeah, and my grandfather.
Interviewer: How much of a part of this whole thing have they been, for you?
Julio: Yeah, they've been very huge.
Interviewer: Big pieces?
Julio: Yeah. Everything, I think my whole ministry and church, and maybe even what I want to do in life, has really been molded by them in these past, I don't know, three, four, maybe five years.
Interviewer: OK. Along that same line, do you feel a lot of support from them in your studies here?
Julio: Yeah, very much so.

Maria had a similar response: "My family has been very encouraging to me and there's been a lot of support from my family." She continued by describing the various aspects of support that she received from her family. These included details such as personal emotional support and help financially when possible.

Being a role model. The pressure of being a role model to other family or community members was also a theme that emerged from the Hispanic students interviewed. Julio, Hugo and Maria were the three that identified this sub-theme, and while it closely associates with support from family, it also stands as its own factor. Maria's comment encapsulated the sentiment concisely. When talking about persistence in relation to family issues and why she has chosen to persist, she said:

> Yeah. I think at this point, mostly, my sisters. I know that I have to be an example to them. I think without my sisters, I would be a little more relaxed, like I don't have to, but I want them to succeed as well, so that's a big motivator to me.

Hugo added that it isn't just about the immediate family, but the community overall. He described a factor of his persistence as: "a broader mindset when I look at these things I need to show that there are opportunities for the next generation."

Support From Within the Institution

While the institution studied does not provide any formal services or staff members in the area of minority affairs, the students interviewed identified some support from within the institution that served as a factor in their persistence.

Institutional size. Several of the students interviewed recognized that the small size of the institution lent itself to a supportive environment. Denzel, in his comparison to his previous experience at a large state school, was asked whether he found that people at the institution studied were fighting for his success. He recalled:

> I definitely felt that people here were fighting for my success. I didn't like at [the large state school] where I just felt like a name and a number on a sheet of paper. I guess it's just the nature of going to a big school. But I felt like people, professors, faculty, or staff members here really cared.

In answering the same question, Hugo said: "I think people are kind of fighting for my success but I think, since it's such a small community, people want to see everyone succeed." In statements such as these, there is a clear link related to institutional size and the resulting support that positively impacts persistence.

Support from faculty and staff. One prominent sub-theme that emerged was faculty support. Julio, in comparing his previous experience in higher education in California said the following:

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> I don't know what the departments are doing, 'cause I'm not very exposed to that. But what I feel in the classroom, in all my classes, is a general desire for each student to succeed. And there's a general desire from one of my professors to do their part to help them succeed.

Similarly Anna, in her comparison regarding her previous experience at a historically black university, said:

> I think the faculty is very kind hearted and they do reach out. At [my previous institution], they never did. I didn't even want to be there whether I was black or not. It was so difficult to connect to the faculty, but here it's way different.

Denzel was equally as clear on this subject:

> Oh, my relationship to faculty has been a real key to my persistence. I mean, it's those professors and teachers going back all the way to high school that took like a genuine interest in me and challenged me the most that really kind of had me develop a love for school and a love for a particular school, or for me to want to stick around there.

Beyond the faculty, the staff is seen as critical. Chris recalls staff members fighting for his success more so than his professors.

> Interviewer: Do you, since being a student here, do you sense that there are other people kind of fighting for your success or do you feel like you are on your own?
> Chris: Believe it or not, those that I do think are fighting for my success are not coming necessarily from instructors. Its like receptionists and secretaries, and people [who care]. "Chris come on you can do it, I know you can." You know so it's from staff it's not necessarily from instructors.

Examples such as these indicate a connection between supporting relationships with faculty and staff at the institution studied and persistence among minority students in the absence of formal staffing or services.

Support from social setting. Social support from within the institution was also a strong sub-theme. The interviewees repeatedly referred to the social support that was found during their time as a student. For example, Anna indicated that the social setting is as important to her as the faculty in regard to motivation. She noted: "The motivation definitely comes from professors and my peers and just the environment that we're in." Maria had the same observation. "Even the students, I think even more the students because they've gone through a lot too so they can share and help." Some of the interviewees see the social support as greater than the faculty support. Valerie, for example, spent time describing friends that she stayed up crying with over various issues. As a result she found more support in the social setting than from faculty. She said: "I think it is actually more support from like other students than it is the faculty." As a

result of such comments, it is clear that the social setting at the institution studied is a factor contributing to persistence.

Self-Motivation

The final emerging theme is the need for self-motivation in minority student persistence. This theme is supported by frequent references to the students' own initiative and the students' sense that the task is doable.

Student initiative. The most dominant sub-theme in this study was the theme regarding student initiative. All but one of the interviewees described their need for initiative if they were to persist. In the absence of such initiative, persistence lacked. When asked what has contributed to persistence in an overall sense, Valerie said:

> I think it's again independence. It's independent of whether you are a minority or not, it's what you as an individual want to do. What I as an individual want to do in higher education, I want to do well.

For Chris, his initiative is the backbone for his persistence.

> It has to be something that you want to do for yourself, and not for nobody else, so regardless of what is surrounding you or trying to prevent you or bothers you. You know, you're not doing it for nobody else, you're doing it for yourself. And you are learning. You are learning something that no one can every take from you. So just look at it with that, and not worry about what everyone else is thinking. You know. Just keep going forward that's all.

Similarly Anna and Hugo both describe their drive or persistence as something that they had prior to coming. There is a sense of initiative that has to be present. Hugo stated, "I think I have that but I don't think anything here really contributes to that." He then went on to describe his need to adjust and lean on that initiative to succeed. Maria recognized that reality as well. She noted: "Of course they're going to help me, but it's only if I ask." Student initiative clearly emerged as a factor contributing to minority student persistence at the institution studied.

The task is doable. The last sub-theme that emerged from the interviews conducted was the need for a sense that the task is doable. Julio and Valerie needed that sense in order to be able to persist. In Valerie's interview, this theme emerged multiple times. The clearest excerpt is as follows:

> Interviewer: In a place where there are no devoted staff members or centers, so to speak, what causes you to persist and keep plugging away and making those changes?
> Valerie: Because it's doable. Because I know I can accomplish, I can accomplish being able to adapt or to adjust or to figure out how my interests and abilities can fit into this standard – its not impossible. I think that there are times when it can be harder, but it's not impossible.

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Julio described a time in one of his classes where he realized how his motivation was affected by his ability to accomplish the task. He concluded:

> When that happened I came out of that class thinking "Man, I can really do this! I can interact this way, with them, and at their level, to the point where it's not just, whatever they say, that's right. I can even change their mind." And so that's one of the first experiences that I had where I felt, you know, I can do this. This is within my grasp. And that just really gave me the motivation to aspire to be as good as any of them.

For both Julio and Valerie, the feeling that the expectations were obtainable was a factor in their persistence at an institution that does not formally address their needs as minority students.

Discussion

This study on persistence among minority students at a diverse institution where no formal office or staff are devoted to minority affairs, contributes to the literature by affirming support services researched in mono-ethnic contexts. The results suggest that the institution studied may be leaving the persistence of these students, in terms of overcoming the challenges identified in the literature, to their own abilities in establishing the various emerging themes. This study forms the foundation for actions that, if implemented, could positively affect persistence among minority students.

Five Implications

The implications suggested below are formed from the five themes that emerged in this study as well as the type of institution studied. For example, while forming a minority student affairs office or a series of ethnic centers on campus is ideal and a recommended long-term plan, the size and scope of the institution studied calls for more immediate and tangible implications.

In regard to the students who articulated a spiritual perspective, institutions such as the one studied ought to take action that pursues such a perspective through their current practice (Bridges *et al.*, 2005). The same could be said for the concept of establishing a sense of purpose or the big picture. Services and programming that encourage a perspective on purpose or how current classes fit into a larger picture would be beneficial in encouraging persistence among minority students.

Participants in this study also affirmed a connection between student motivation and support from people within the academic institution. In the case of the support from people, most of whom were family, the outcome was self-motivation to persist. In terms of support from the individuals within the institution, the students interviewed reported receiving that as a result of their own motivation, or as a result of the connections they chose to make. Therefore, the institution could address this by formally planning ways in which support is made more readily available, such as facilitating mentoring relationships on campus.

Conclusion

Educational institutions cannot afford to ignore the issue of the persistence of minority students. Addressing issues related to a spiritual perspective, a sense of calling or big picture, supporting relationships, support from individuals within the institution, and a student's self-motivation emerged as critical to the four-year private religious institution that was part of this study.

W. Bernt King is the dean of students at a Bible college and seminary on the East Coast.

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