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NATIONAL LOUIS UNIVERSITY

FROM CRISIS TO EMPOWERMENT: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

IN

COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP

By

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DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation work to my family and many friends. There is a special feeling of gratitude to my loving parents, the late James Poole, who taught me the value of an education, and my loving mother, Ida Poole, whose words of encouragement and push for tenacity has been unconditional. I love you mom. I also dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Tracy, and my son, James, who have supported me throughout this process. I will always appreciate all of your love and support. To my grandchildren, Eric, Jamie Leigh, Erin, and Madisyn, may you always seek higher education and be all that God has intended you to be. Granny loves you.

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ABSTRACT

Social challenges tear at the fabric of the African American family, revealing complexities that identify a de facto leader, the African American woman. She exists in a chasm of overt circumstances which heavily influences her successes. The purpose of this study is to identify factors that motivated seven female African American community college graduates to persist throughout crisis and to ultimately reach their academic goals and graduate. Using a qualitative narrative design, the study involved semi structured interviews with seven African American women who employed community colleges and other support strategies to accomplish appropriate responses to crises, identify practical support mechanisms, and achieve professional advancement in order to attain professional success. Findings provide a clearer picture of the elements these participants feel foster and enhance their abilities to stay enrolled, to persist and to graduate from college. The study findings illustrate the importance students place on their family's support, the support of their faith and the support of college faculty and staff. The Bates Model for the Initial Creation of a Community College Counseling / Crisis Intervention Center is presented to foster the development of a support service center which will allow community colleges to better meet the needs of these non-traditional students.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Community colleges were established in 1901 in Joliet, Illinois, by J. Stanley Brown and William Rainey Harper in order to accommodate students seeking a postsecondary education while remaining in their local communities. A defining feature of community colleges is that they allow students to obtain an affordable education within a system of open admission. The 1947 Truman Commission proposed the creation of a network of community colleges to provide an education to all Americans seeking the opportunity to pursue a degree beyond high school.

Since their inception, community colleges have proliferated throughout the United States (Phillippe & Patton, 2000). Within the last two decades, the greatest degree of expansion in higher education has occurred in the community college sector (Shugart, 2008). Between 2000 and 2008, enrollments in two-year colleges rose from 5.9 to 7 million students, with the number of students projected to reach 8.2 million by 2019 (Aud et al., 2010). The community college model continues to offer open enrollment to students seeking affordable postsecondary education and the chance to pursue a variety of educational objectives, including academic transfers to four-year institutions (Driscoll, 2007). Additionally, this model presents opportunities for remedial and continuing education as well as technical and occupational education and workforce development (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Furthermore, the student populations at community colleges consist primarily of students who commute rather than living on campus, with a large percentage of nontraditional students attending classes part-time (Hagedorn, 2006).

Community college student enrollment has increasingly become broader and richer in diversity in terms of age and ethnicity. Roughly three-quarters of economically disadvantaged

minority and first generation students—categories that frequently overlap—begin their college careers in community colleges (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Approximately 70,000 African Americans have had the opportunity to seek higher education because of community colleges. About one-third (35%) of the students attending community colleges are first-time students working full time, compared to 11% in public four-year institutions (Zeiss 2008). The average community college student tends to be older, minority, and female as compared to the average student attending a four-year institution (Hagedorn, 2006).

Community colleges are continually evolving and expanding to make higher education available to the maximum number of students. For nearly 400 years, African American people in the United States have aspired to the fundamental idea that education is a basic right in a democratic society, striving against the odds, and for most of that time, against the law, to become educated for reasons of self- improvement and economic advancement (West, 1994). The importance of gaining a good education has been a powerful force in the lives of African American men and women alike.

In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson graduated from Oberlin College to become the first African American woman to earn a college degree (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). Several decades after her landmark accomplishment, the inception of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the late 19th and early 20th century provided a pathway to higher education for African American women and men. Spelman College, founded in 1881, and Bennett College, founded in 1926, became the first colleges for black women. The eras of slavery, Emancipation, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow established the climate in which African American men and women sought and attained educational experiences as students, teachers and leaders. However,

in a segregated society that once legalized the doctrine of separate but equal, African American women were consistently more separate and less equal.

The landscape changed dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s as the passage of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* and the momentum of the Civil Rights Act of 1965 reignited the belief among African Americans that education was the key to a brighter future (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991). Historically, African American women have carried the responsibility for the protection, preservation and security of their families. The actions of many of these women centered on education by first encouraging others in their pursuits of education and then by seeking education for themselves, often under challenging circumstances.

Women of all ethnicities have made tremendous progress in education in recent years. Over the last decade, female enrollment in two-year colleges increased by 19%, from 3.4 to 4 million students, while male enrollment grew by 15%, from 2.6 to 2.9 million students (Aud et al., 2010). Women now surpass their male counterparts in earning degrees, a pattern that holds across racial and ethnic groups. Of all the degrees awarded to African Americans in 2007, women earned 66% of the associate, 66% of the baccalaureate, 72% of the master's, and 66% of the doctoral degrees. This trend coincides with a notable increase in the numbers of African American and Latina (o) students on college campuses throughout the U.S.

For African American women, the path to a college degree has been far from easy, but as Sealey-Ruiz points out, "Despite their struggle for higher education during the past century, Black women have made amazing strides" (p. 45). Paradoxically, however, their success comes with a double edge. The fact that black women have made accelerated progress in entering and graduating from higher education obscures the inequities that still persist and diverts attention from their unique experiences and needs for support (Rosales & Person, 2003).

Community colleges face a formidable challenge in providing programs, services, and supports that serve the needs of an extremely diverse and heterogeneous population. That challenge is mirrored in the circumstances of students struggling to balance work, academic, and family responsibilities (Hagedorn, 2006). Since the early 1980s, there has been an inexorable change in the landscape of higher education, with increasing numbers of adult, part-time, evening, and commuter students and a flourishing community college sector (Ryan, 2003; Shugart, 2008). Adult women play a powerful role in this trend. Frequently, they enroll in college in response to events such as job loss or divorce or the death of a spouse or partner. Awareness of the barriers to career advancement presented by limited education is another prominent reason why many women return to school (White, 2001). Many community college women are single parents. The desire to provide a better life for their families is often a driving force in their motivation to attain a degree.

Community colleges appeal to nontraditional students because they are financially affordable for those who are economically disadvantaged, a category which includes many African American women. African American women also attend community colleges because their location makes them easily accessible and they have flexible program options to appeal to employed, adult, and part-time students (Shugart, 2008). Community colleges have been in the vanguard of online education, making their classes even more convenient for working adults. All these features make community colleges welcoming places for African American women seeking higher education.

In recent years, community colleges have expanded their roles in assisting low skilled and low-income individuals to advance beyond poverty and toward self-sufficiency (Hagedorn, 2006). Program redesign efforts are focusing on the needs of working adults through a variety of

basic skills programs including remedial or developmental programs, adult basic education (ABE) programs, English as a second Language (ESL) programs, General Education Development (GED) programs and alternative programs for out-of-school youth.

These strategies are focused on improving postsecondary academic ability and advancing persistence in program completion for lower-income working adults and low-wage earners.

Adults who choose to return to school have advantages and disadvantages. On one side, maturity, concern for their families, and a more realistic assessment of the knowledge and skills required for workforce success, work to the advantage of adult learners. On the other side, the unique challenges they face in striving toward a degree call for specialized services and supports (Bauman et al., 2004; Gary, Kling, & Dodd, 2004; Hagedorn, 2006; Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000; Ryan, 2003).

There are many advocates of campus counseling programs and services uniquely tailored for African American women (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Bradley & Sanders, 2003; Jones, 2009; T. Johnson, 2001; Rosales & Person, 2003). Seminars, workshops, mentorships, career counseling, group counseling, financial advice, and an important but frequently overlooked barrier to women's college success, child care services, are among the empirically supported and promising strategies recommended for advancing the educational and career success of African American college women.

Background of the Study

There are many reasons for African Americans' affinity for community colleges. Some researchers argue that the community college can be a nurturing environment for African American students. Cohen (2003) found that for many African Americans the community college setting offers a more comfortable learning environment than a traditional four-year

institution. Community colleges offer a wide range of attractive courses and programs including technical, business, and nursing programs that equip students with knowledge and skills in high demand by employers. Additionally, to counteract high rates of attrition and improve student retention, community colleges invest heavily in programs and strategies designed to provide students with academic, psychosocial, financial, and career support (ACT, 2010a, 2010b; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Hagedorn, 2006; Jenkins, 2007). Course offerings and support services vary from campus to campus, but increasingly, community college officials recognize that to stay competitive they have to adapt their programs and services to meet the needs of their highly diverse and nontraditional student populations.

Despite ongoing efforts to improve the educational outcomes of students who enroll in community colleges, high rates of attrition are a perennial problem. Most new students aspire to transfer to a four-year program and ultimately attain a bachelor's degree. In reality, the majority of students leave school without earning either a bachelor's or an associate degree (Driscoll, 2007). Only 28% of new full-time community college students graduate with an associate degree or a certificate within three years, a figure that only rises to 45% after six years (CCCSE, 2010). Just more than half of the students who enter associate degree programs return for their second year.

Students drop out of college for a complex array of reasons. Linda Serra Hagedorn (2006), director of the *Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students* (TRUCCS) was herself an urban community college student. From the dual position of insider and expert, Hagedorn understands the complexities facing students striving to balance the demands of school, work, and family. She also argues that neither the existing models of student persistence

nor the typologies used to classify students sufficiently captures the various groups of students attending community colleges and the situations confronting them.

African American women frequently have a number of roles in their daily lives. These roles may include primary caregiver, provider or householder, spouse or life partner, single parent, and role model for younger siblings or community members (Rosales & Person, 2003). Taking on the student role adds to the intricate tasks of balancing multiple roles. Many students regardless of ethnicity or gender begin college not only underprepared academically but with unrealistic expectations of college coursework and college life. The first semester can play a pivotal role in the future success of new community college students (Driscoll, 2007).

Institutions with the highest rates of retention typically use socialization strategies such as orientation classes, first semester seminars, and student success courses to foster the academic and social integration of students from the time they arrive on campus. On many campuses, however, there is no mechanism for early socialization or intervention, with the result that students may become disengaged within the first weeks (Ashburn, 2007; Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2008; Karp, O’Gara, & Hughes, 2008; Karp, 2011).

Without appropriate support, some students undergo a crisis. Crisis is defined as a period of disequilibrium and decreased functioning because of an event or situation that creates a significant problem that cannot be resolved using familiar coping strategies (Roberts, 2000).

Roberts (2005) further defines crisis as

an acute disruption of psychological homeostasis in which one’s usual coping mechanisms fail and there exists evidence of distress and functional impairment. The subjective reaction to a stressful life experience that comprises the individual’s stability and ability to cope or function... (p. 778).

Stress is endemic among college students. In a study of community college students, Pierceall (2007) found that three-quarters of the students displayed moderate levels of stress.

This occurrence is not unusual in college student populations, nor was it unusual to find that 12% of the students displayed high levels of stress. Another finding, also common in research with college students, was that the women experienced higher levels of stress than their male counterparts, even though they were taking the same number of credits and the women were actually doing better academically.

African American college women can be especially vulnerable to stress. They can also be highly resilient. African American women thrive in a community college environment that validates their educational and career aspirations as well as their ability to fulfill them (Johnson, 2001). Feeling known and valued by faculty, enjoying good instruction in classes, and being part of a learning environment marked by appreciation for diversity are among the factors that make students feel validated on campus and contribute to their success (Barnett, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

African American women represent 60% of all female community college students (AASCU, 2005). Most are single parents, or returning to school as older students with dependent children, and in some cases attempting to complete the task of earning a degree while working. Despite their historical struggle, “The legacy of African-American women in the U.S. has been one of power and strength along with struggle. . . [t]hey provided strength when all else failed. . . [T]hey understood that struggle and persistence were positive things” (Johnson, 2001, pp. 37-41). In order to persist and fulfill their educational goals, African American women require support services that address their specific issues. Yet community colleges may not be aware of this population’s needs. Callan and Ewell (2006) call attention to the fact that African American postsecondary students “are still only three-quarters as likely to complete a degree as

their white counterparts” (pp. 20-21). Creating a relevant educational environment that supports the retention and successful graduation of this population is essential (AACU, 2002).

Providing students with appropriate services entails understanding of their specific needs, preferences, and life experiences. While statistics clearly point to an increasing presence of African American women on community college campuses, Rosales and Person (2003) note that black women in higher education are “either labeled and responded to as ‘blacks’ or ‘women’... but rarely viewed and understood fully as ‘black women’” (pp. 53-54). They argue that the advancement of black women in higher education has been exaggerated to the extent that they are not perceived as needing specific services and supports. The experiences of African American women on community college campuses belie that assumption (Johnson, 2001).

According to Rosales and Person (2003) most of the programs and services that assist African American women are offered in one of six settings: women’s centers, multicultural centers, counseling and health services, cultural programs, student activities, and educational equity-academic support programs. There are a number of highly effective programs that are specifically designed for African American women. Other programs are more generic in nature but are nevertheless effective.

As an example of a culturally tailored program, Bradley and Sanders (2003) described a *sista* counseling intervention for African American college women. The intervention builds on the strong social support networks that frequently serve as an essential resource for promoting resilience in the face of adversity. According to Bradley and Sanders, group counseling and support groups have been lauded as “the treatment of choice for African American female students” (p. 187). Unfortunately, college counseling centers do not always offer group sessions, or their counselors might not have the training to lead groups for African American women.

African American students, male and female, tend to have low utilization of college counseling, which many researchers ascribe to perceptions that the counseling provided by white counselors would be less satisfying and less relevant than counseling provided by African Americans.

Gary et al. (2004) described a counseling and support program designed to meet the needs of adult female and minority college students. To eradicate any perceived stigma attached to the idea of counseling, the services are provided by faculty counselors rather than counseling center staff. The brief counseling program was augmented by referrals for long-term counseling, medical treatment, tutoring, child care, and other services brought up by the participants.

Something as simple as onsite child care can be a pivotal factor in a woman's college success (Johnson et al., 2000). During the counselor-led, monthly, themed support group meetings, the participants discussed issues relevant to adult learners including balancing multiple responsibilities, setting priorities, coping with guilt over missing family activities, having realistic expectations, and dealing with family, work, and personal crises (Gary et al., 2004). Some groups were led by graduate interns, also minority women, who served as role models for success.

The program also involved psycho-educational group sessions, considered especially beneficial for adult students (Gary et al. (2004). Exercises and simulations were central components of the sessions which included stress management, time management, conflict resolution, and relationship enhancement skills. The program built on the participants' natural support networks, and the faculty counselors provided the participants with information on all available resources and encouraged their involvement with formal and informal supports. The powerful support systems that arose from the program provided the participants with services ranging from academic assistance to stress management to child care.

The program described by Gary et al. (2004) is a flexible, multidimensional psycho-educational program that can easily be adapted to different settings and populations. The program has been highly successful in retaining the primarily African American and Latina women it was designed for. The literature is replete with case examples of successful programs, yet many community college students do not have access to such programs, or alternately are unaware of the available programs due to lack of orientation or other socialization strategies.

Community colleges could play a greater role in delivering the benefits of an associate degree to African American women by implementing innovative and empirically documented programs tailored to their unique concerns. African American women, experiencing crises, face a myriad of issues that require specific interventions if they are to successfully work through challenges to earn their degree. Despite the existence of innovative and effective programs created to meet the needs of the various groups representing the increasingly diverse community college population, student support services have been slow to keep up with the changing campus demographics (Hagedorn, 2006).

Community colleges may not be aware of the needs of their African American female students. The issues they face can include family crises such as child care, domestic violence, and finances which are needed to cover basic needs, incarceration, or drug abuse. Engle and Tinto (2008) aptly titled their article in support of student learning communities *Access without Support is Not Opportunity*. Learning communities are one of many successful strategies for facilitating the success of economically disadvantaged, minority, and first generation students. Open admissions policies are not meant to be a revolving door. Any system established to address the issues faced by African American women must be ongoing and systematic. The most successful college student persistence programs are designed to support students from the

moment they enter the institution and continue providing appropriate supports throughout the course of their college career.

The problem is the lack of specific programs that take into account the conditions that African American women are likely to experience (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Johnson, 2001; Rosales & Person, 2003; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). Another problem is the lack of ongoing counseling, few if any devices including brochures and manuals on the community college experience, and a lack of ongoing orientation on the challenges and difficulties related to obtaining a college degree. Community colleges should investigate the use of forums to permit discussions on issues affecting their African American female students; for example, forums could be held on attending college while nurturing and supporting a child, being the first in one's family to attend college, or struggling financially. Institutions exacerbate the effects of the problem by failing to design programs to help students, struggling with new and multiple roles, understand the short-term sacrifices involved in pursuing a college degree versus the long-term gains of having a college degree. Failing to equip students at high risk for dropping out, with strategies to overcome short-term crises, further undermines their chances of achieving their goals.

Role-play is a strategy with documented success in enhancing decision making ability. Successfully implementing role-play can produce better decision making results in crisis situations and may even improve confidence (Gary et al., 2004; Rosales & Person, 2003). Role-play exercises tap into the sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). By implementing role-play exercises, community colleges or other agencies might help African American college women understand the exact implications of their responses and provide opportunities to learn successful responses to use in crisis situations.

Resources such as hotlines, intervention and emergency services, and partnering programs are sources of practical support and self-confidence. Training in the effective use of the Internet, for self-service information gathering, builds self-reliance and self-esteem. Providing information on free resources such as the school or public library, as a suitable research and study venue, may broaden students' perspective and offer lifestyle alternatives. Additional resources to facilitate the educational success of African American women may include free passes to museums, CD and DVD libraries and educational and entertainment programs which the students can enjoy with their children or other family members and friends.

Women who enter college, in response to personal hardship, thrive in a caring and nurturing environment. As the family's leader and role model, the children of African American women, who strive to better their lives, may persist in poverty if educational advancement is beyond their reach. Community colleges have been known since their inception as "the people's college". Too often, they have also been called revolving door institutions. Community colleges play a pivotal role in helping those who have historically been disenfranchised and underserved raise their financial and social status (Hagedorn, 2006). It is clear, however, that much more needs to be done to help traditionally underserved students persist and successfully graduate. This study seeks to provide information on how to attain key improvements in the standards of living for African American women. These improvements are an advantage to African American women as well as their children, family, community, and the greater society.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the persistence and goal achievement of African American women, who self-identify as being "in crisis", while attending community college.

Part of the purpose of this study is to ask questions of individuals who have graduated from community colleges and to determine how these seven candidates successfully completed their studies. Several statistical and conceptual studies exist detailing the determination of African American students and their participation in higher education (Barbatis, 2008, 2010; Johnson, 2001; Karp & Hughes, 2008). However, the intent of this study is to identify factors that motivated seven African American women, who self-identified as being “in crisis”, to persist through crisis and ultimately graduate from community college.

Research Questions

Three questions guide this study:

1. What self-identified crises did the participants face while attending community college?
2. How were the participants aided in their self-identified crises and how did this aid contribute to their persistence in their academic program of study?
3. How can community colleges better assist African American female students in crisis to persist and achieve their educational goals?

Significance of Study

Many African American women seek higher education, which might have been unattainable without the affordability and access offered by community colleges. These institutions are a critical foundation to African American women who are seeking personal support and advancement through the numerous programs offered in the community college system. This study will provide African American women with the opportunity to share their insights of the community college experience through their personal stories and descriptions of their path to achievement.

The experiences of these women offer valuable information to community college professionals. The study is designed to help these institutions identify and understand the needs of African American female students, thus enabling the colleges to target resources for assisting these students who face barriers to admission and persistence to graduation. This study will contribute to improving the culture and understanding of community colleges for African American women seeking to better their lives through higher education. The findings and recommendations of this study can be used to inform community colleges in creating new strategies for improving the success of African American female students.

Design of the Study

According to Creswell (2008),

A qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting. Moreover, qualitative research examines the patterns of meaning which emerge from the data and these are often presented in the participants' own words. The task of the qualitative researcher is to find patterns within those words (and actions) and to present those patterns for others to inspect while at the same time staying as close to the construction of the world as the participants originally experienced it (e-book, pp. 50-52).

This research is qualitative in nature and will examine the ways African American women handled self-identified crisis while attending community college, and in spite of personal crisis, demonstrated resilience and persevered to earn their degree.

Engaging in an interpretive paradigm with seven African American women who vary in age, this research project will illuminate the various strategies these women used to survive their crisis while attending community college. According to Creswell (2008), qualitative research elucidates patterns which emerge after close observation, careful documentation, and thoughtful analysis of the research topic. What can be discovered are contextual findings; this process of discovery is the basis of the qualitative approach, placing emphasis on understanding through

looking closely at the participant's words, actions and records. This research will also employ a descriptive perspective, using interviews to discover major influences that fostered these women's resilience and motivated them to continue.

Another aspect of this study is to identify whether there were any common crises and support mechanisms the women employed. The interviews will be conducted using a qualitative narrative design to illuminate the types of support mechanisms needed at any given time. For example, the interviews are likely to reveal that many solutions lie within the individual's church, community, or family as well as some other strategy or tactic. The objective is to find out how these individuals rode out challenges and to channel those findings into this study to provide information that can be used to provide other students with early intervention with maximum positive impact.

In choosing between continuing education beyond high school and opting out for the immediate benefit of full-time employment, prospective college students face the dilemma of postponing the acquisition of immediate cash benefits for the possible accumulation of thousands of dollars of debt in exchange for a long-term capital investment. For low-income families who face difficulties in making ends meet, the additional burden of college tuition can be overwhelming. Postsecondary education provides both economic and personal fulfillment; this is especially true for women and ethnic minorities in terms of self-sufficiency where it concerns the complex realities of career choices and preparation (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hagedorn, 2006). These decisions are especially complex for women who frequently interrupt education and career preparation in order to manage work and family life. The traditional concepts of education, career development and decision-making may not apply for many low-income women when economic survival is the main motivator in seeking employment (White, 2001). Understanding

the career development of women of color, working class people and others that do not fit into the traditional patterns is central to Bandura's general social cognitive career theory (SCCT).

Several model programs for low-income African American female students have been developed to counsel them and emphasize four areas: (1) individual assessment which helps students become more aware of individual aptitudes and abilities; (2) education and career information which examines careers from a broad perspective; and (3) skill-building exercises and integrated experiences with peers and counselors (Fisher, 1987). These student services provide activities to expand participants' knowledge of nontraditional career options that builds self-esteem, develops problem solving and decision making skills, and increases their awareness of the importance of creating life plans. A curriculum may also cover special issues, in the participants' lives, such as parenting, male-female relationships, and sexual violence.

More and more people are choosing post-secondary education immediately after high school to enhance their life choices, rather than limiting their options. Statistics clearly document this increasing trend (Aud et al., 2010). As a result, higher education must accommodate an increasingly diverse student body, including not only racial and ethnic diversity but also age diversity and different learning disabilities. Older students, who usually have families, work full-time and study part-time, represent the fastest growing age demographic in postsecondary education. While only 27% of the students in this group receive financial aid, money is cited as the major obstacle for both men and women contemplating postsecondary education. Concurrently there has been a substantial increase among younger students attending college to combine work and education. There has been a notable increase in the number of students between the ages of 20 to 24 years old that may reflect the fact that today's two-year and four-year students are taking longer than their predecessors to earn their degree (Shugart,

2008). The new traditional student is employed while studying for a degree, takes fewer courses per semester, lives off campus, changes institutions one or more times during college, and as a result of these factors, is enrolled for a longer time. It is not unusual, particularly among community college students, for students to stop out and re-enroll at a later date (Hagedorn, 2006). Some students even take courses at more than one institution.

Evolving economic transformation encourages more interaction between school and work, in keeping with the idea of lifelong learning that includes knowledge based skill development (Shugart, 2008). In addition to the technological changes in the workplace, downsizing and outsourcing has stimulated more interaction between the educational and occupational worlds.

In today's economy women can expect to make more transitions between career and education: some by choice and others by necessity. Those struggling to get off of public assistance often reenter the job market and begin a career for themselves while raising children. To face these changes and make these transitions successfully, these women will need to make decisions to educate themselves by returning to school to update and enhance their skills (White, 2001). These women with children need more time, more flexibility with class scheduling, day care services, and the single most important factor, more financial aid. The factor of financial aid is most important to these women because it makes college accessible and makes the decision to go back to college easier. Community colleges rate highly as models of accessible institutions of affordability and flexibility to these students, who most often are first generation college students as well.

College graduates on average earn more than high school graduates. According to the Census Bureau, over an adult's working life, high school graduates earn an average of \$1.2

million; associate's degree holders earn about \$1.6 million; and bachelor's degree holders earn about \$2.1 million (Day & Newburger, 2002). The differences in lifetime earnings put the cost of college study in realistic perspective with 80% of all students enrolled in public four-year or two-year community colleges. According to the U.S. Department of Education Report, *Think College Early*, a full-time student at a public four-year college pays an average of \$8, 655 for in-state tuition, room and board. A full-time student, in a two-year community college, pays an average of \$1, 359 per year in tuition (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

For individuals in the lower socioeconomic bracket, the cost of choosing higher education is worth the investment of time and money since it provides opportunities for meaningful employment that benefits them and their families. Moreover, college graduates tend to have a more optimistic view of the world. Therefore, in the end, education appears to benefit both individuals and society, increasing the workforce while decreasing reliance on government financial support (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These factors are especially relevant to African American women seeking a more productive and satisfying life.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined for the purpose of this study.

African Americans: Black people living in the United States who are descended from families who originally came from Africa and represent 12% of today's population. The use of the term African American in this study refers to the group of people who regard themselves and are regarded as being of African descent and American citizenship (The Online Etymology Dictionary, 2001). The term is used in place of the term black, another term denoting people of African American heritage which first saw use around 1555 in association with any "member of a black-skinned race of Africa" (The Online Etymology Dictionary).

Crisis: Crisis is defined as a period of disequilibrium and decreased functioning because of an event or situation that creates a significant problem such as the sense of helplessness, confusion, anxiety, shock, or anger. The crisis is not the event itself; rather, it is the individual's perception of and response to the situation (Parad, 1971). The use of the term crisis is for reference to any harsh experience or perceived occurrence that the participants faced during their attendance at a community college. It includes extreme circumstances such as violence against the person as well as chronic conditions including living in poverty, living without adequate wages while caring for and having to house her children, or undergoing ongoing negative verbal assaults. It also includes the element of crucial timing characterized by a pivotal moment of confrontation requiring action and decision.

Empowerment: Empowerment is a multidimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important (Zimmerman, 1984).

Faith: "Faith is stepping out on nothing and landing on something." It is more than just the stuff from which dreams are made; it is the inevitable source that enables them to become reality (West, 1993, p.2). Faith as derived from Hebrews 11:1, "is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." The application of the word defines the skill set the participants employ when applying their faith to crises they determine as too overwhelming to address with their own resources. In other words, whenever a situation presents itself and no possible solution exists and the person's experiences do not prepare her for moving the circumstance toward the desired result, one employs faith to address the situation and hopes for

the best, leaving the situation to resolve itself at some point in the future without further intervention.

Religion: The black church—black Christian communities of various denominations that came into being when African American slaves decided, often at risk of life and limb, to “make Jesus their choice” and to share with one another their common Christian sense of purpose and Christian understanding of their circumstances (West,1993). The term religion refers to the application of the participant’s beliefs and morals as steeped in a traditional church or congregational practice. Participants refer to religion as their identified belief as Christians, Baptists, Evangelicals, Catholics, etc. They follow the doctrines of their chosen faith as best they can and understand and lean on its structure and programs within their individual church to aid them in addressing crises and receive the necessary support and desired services.

Resilience: Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stressors. It means bouncing back from difficult experiences (APA, 2004). Resilience refers to the ability to build automatic reactions and reflexes, to be able to weather a crisis, recover, pick ones-self up and move beyond the response to the challenge onward toward one’s ultimate goals.

Organization of the Study

Chapter one has provided an overview of the study. Chapter two discusses and reviews relevant literature providing a foundation for extending the knowledge base guiding this study and the conceptual framework. In chapter three, details concerning the research design, sampling and data collection methods, data analysis procedures, limitations for the study and researcher as the instrument will be explained. Chapter four will present the data analysis and

findings. The conclusions, implications and recommendations for future research are provided in chapter five.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature presented in this review is drawn from the following EBSCO databases: Academic Search Premier, MasterFILE Premier, Business Source Premier, ERIC, PsycINFO, and PsycARTICLES. Keywords used either individually or in conjunction include: African Americans, women, students, nontraditional, adult learners, gender, ethnicity, community colleges, higher education, persistence, retention, graduation, programs, faculty, social, academic, integration, achievement, success, social support, resources, resilience, stress, coping, counseling, services, supports, learning communities, seminars, courses, advisors, advising, mentors, mentoring, and developmental education.

In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson graduated from Oberlin College, becoming the first African American woman to earn a college degree (Sealey-Ruiz, 2007). Several decades later, the inception of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the late 19th and early 20th century opened a pathway for African Americans to pursue higher education. This trend included the founding of Spelman College in 1881 and Bennett College in 1926, representing the first colleges for black women. The path has been arduous but Sealey-Ruiz (2007) declares that, “Despite their struggle for higher education during the past century, Black women have made amazing strides” (p. 45). Paradoxically, this remarkable progress comes with a double edge. According to Rosales and Person (2003), the fact that black women have made accelerated progress in entering and graduating from higher education masks lingering inequities and draws attention away from their unique experiences and needs for support.

In the late 20th and early 21st century, the most notable growth in student enrollment has taken place in the community college sector (Shugart, 2008). Between 2000 and 2008,

enrollments in 2-year colleges increased from 5.9 to 7 million students, with a projected figure of 8.2 million students by 2019 (Aud et al., 2010). In a marked reversal of historical trends, women now surpass men in enrolling in all higher education sectors. Within the last 10 years, female enrollment in 2-year colleges grew by 19%, from 3.4 to 4 million students, while male enrollment increased by 15%, from 2.6 to 2.9 million students. Women also surpass their male counterparts in earning degrees, a pattern that holds true across racial and ethnic groups. Of all the degrees granted to African Americans in 2007, women earned 66% of the associate, 66% of the baccalaureate, 72% of the master's, and 66% of the doctoral degrees. This trend accompanies a substantial increase in the numbers of African American and Latina (o) students on college campuses. Despite the striking progress, however, minority students are still less likely to earn a college degree than their white counterparts. Engle and Tinto (2008) aptly titled their article in support of student learning communities *Access without Support is Not Opportunity*.

Approximately three-quarters of economically disadvantaged, minority, and first generation students—categories with substantial overlap—begin their college careers in community colleges (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). Most students enter their respective programs with aspirations to transfer to a four-year program and ultimately graduate with a bachelor's degree. In reality, the majority of students leave school with neither a bachelor's nor an associate degree (Driscoll, 2007). Only 28% of new, full-time community college students graduate with an associate degree or a certificate within three years and after six years the figure only rises to 45% (CCCSE, 2010). Slightly more than half of associate degree candidates return to school for their second year.

The first semester can play a pivotal role in the student's educational future. Yet there is evidence that as early as the first four weeks of college many students risk becoming disengaged by virtue of being provided with no academic or psychosocial support (Ashburn, 2007). Given their open admissions policies, community colleges serve a high proportion of academically underprepared students, and, as a result, invest heavily in developmental and remedial programs (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Ironically, this emphasis on underprepared students often works to the detriment of students who are academically prepared but may actually be less integrated into campus life (Ashburn, 2007; Derby & Smith, 2004).

A major challenge for community colleges is providing programs, services, and supports that fulfill the needs of an extremely diverse and heterogeneous population. Linda Serra Hagedorn (2006), director of the *Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students* (TRUCCS) was herself an urban community college student and describes the project as “the culmination of a dream and a response to personal experience” (p. 4). From the dual position of insider and expert, Hagedorn understands the complexity of struggling to balance work, academic, and family obligations. She also argues that neither the existing models of student persistence nor the typologies used to classify students captures the various groups of students attending community colleges and the unique situations they face.

A particular point of controversy among community college researchers is the applicability of the predominant models of student persistence to community college students. Tinto's (1993) interactionalist model is the popular framework for examining students' persistence. Originally formulated in the 1970s, Tinto's theory was based on the traditional age full-time residential four-year college students who represented the overwhelming majority of students enrolled in higher education at the time. According to the model, as interpreted by

Hagedorn (2006), these young students still in late adolescence “must abandon their old lives and become socially and academically integrated into their new postsecondary environments in order to succeed.” As such, the model is a poor fit for community college students (p. 9).

The main point of Hagedorn’s (2006) critique is that upon entering higher education, community college students do not abandon their lives before college. Instead, college becomes one more element of their busy lives. The transition may be no less daunting, and indeed, many first generation, low-income, and minority students experience culture shock when they make the transition to college. For many community college students, support and encouragement from their social networks outside of the college environment are critical to their success.

Within a few years of the 1975 publication of Tinto’s original theory, the higher education landscape began to change inexorably, with increasing numbers of adult, part-time, evening, and commuter students and a burgeoning community college sector (Ryan, 2003; Shugart, 2008). Adult women occupy a major role in this trend, often enrolling in college in response to events such as job loss or divorce or the death of a spouse or partner or awareness of the barriers to career advancement presented by limited education (White, 2001). Many community college women have children and the desire to provide a better life for their families; this is often a driving force in their motivation to earn a degree. Maturity, concern for their families, and a more realistic appraisal of the knowledge and skills required for workforce success operate to the advantage of adult learners. On the other hand, the unique challenges they face in pursuit of a degree call for customized services and supports (Bauman et al., 2004; Gary, Kling, & Dodd, 2004; Hagedorn, 2006; Johnson, Schwartz, & Bower, 2000; Ryan, 2003).

Several authors advocate campus counseling programs and services uniquely designed for African American women (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Bradley & Sanders, 2003; Jones,

2009; T. Johnson, 2001; Rosales & Person, 2003). The black feminist theory of Patricia Hill Collins (2000) is often invoked in this context. Such programs would recognize the multiple facets of black women's identities, and, in particular, build on the historical strength and resilience of black women and the power of strong social support networks. Seminars, workshops, mentorships, career counseling, group counseling, financial advice, and to address an important structural barrier to women's success, child care services, are among the empirically supported and promising strategies recommended to facilitate the educational and career success of African American college women.

In response to high rates of attrition, community colleges invest in a wide range of programs and strategies to provide students with academic, psychosocial, financial, and career support (ACT, 2010a, 2010b; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Hagedorn, 2006; Jenkins, 2007). What is frequently missing is not the programs per se but rather a mechanism for alerting students from the time they arrive on campus to the various available resources (Ashburn, 2007; Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2008; Karp, O'Gara, & Hughes, 2008; Karp, 2011). Institutions with the highest rates of retention typically employ socialization strategies such as orientation classes, first semester seminars, and student success courses and offer students a range of services and supports uniquely tailored to the various groups represented on campus. Tinto's most recent work has focused on learning communities which synergistically fuse academic and social integration for promoting the educational success of historically underrepresented and at-risk community college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Providing students with appropriate services entails understanding of their specific needs, preferences, and life experiences. Knowledge of the changing demographics of students in

higher education is the first essential step in providing students with the academic, social, and practical supports that will best help them achieve their educational goals.

Community College Student Demographics

Sandy Shugart (2008), president of Valencia Community College, began his career as a senior higher education administrator in the early 1980s when “the adult learner was all the rage” (p. 18). With the shift to a technology driven innovation oriented economy, it became clear that workers in virtually all occupational sectors would need to upgrade their skills periodically over the course of their working lives. Additionally, the generation graduating from high school in the 1980s was far smaller than the baby boom generation preceding it. The dual forces of a burgeoning adult college population and a shrinking number of traditional age students were predicted to shape the future of American higher education. Thirty years later adult learners have indeed become a visible presence on college campuses, especially at community colleges. As described by Shugart, however, the profile of today’s student is more of a new traditional student who is not dramatically older than the traditional students of past generations but who diverges from the traditional model in other significant ways.

Over the last decades several major trends have altered the higher education landscape. Online courses and programs, adult degree programs, and for-profit colleges offering all levels of degrees have proliferated, and as Shugart (2008) points out, “Perhaps most notably, the community college movement came into its own,” enrolling more than half of all students pursuing higher education (p. 19). Contrary to the original predictions, between 1985 and 2005, the most striking increase in college students, by age, has been among 18 to 19-year olds who now represent virtually half of the college population (49.3%), up from 40.4% two decades ago.

In contrast, adults between 25 and 29 showed only a small increase from 9.2% to 11.9% and those 30-34 increased by a scant 6.1% to 6.9%.

There has been a striking increase in the numbers of students from 20 to 24, which Shugart (2008) attributes to the fact that today's two-year and four-year students are taking longer than their predecessors to earn their degree. The new traditional student is employed while studying for a degree, takes fewer courses per semester, lives off campus, changes institutions one or more times during college, and, as a result of these factors, is enrolled for a longer time. It is not unusual, especially among community college students, for students to "stop out" and re-enroll at a later date (Hagedorn, 2006). Some students even take courses at more than one institution.

Shugart (2008) cites the 2007 policy paper *Adult Learners in Higher Education*, authorized by the U.S. Department of Labor and written by Jobs for the Future, which concluded that programs designed in an era when most students were 18-22 years old who entered college upon high school graduation, studied full-time and were dependent upon their families for financial support are poorly suited to the needs of adult learners. The report characterized the majority of adult learners as "employees who study" as opposed to "students who work" (p. 19). Community colleges enroll 45% of all undergraduate students and close to two-thirds of highly nontraditional students.

Community colleges also serve slightly more than three-quarters of low-income first generation students who are at the highest risk for dropping out (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These students are also most likely to need developmental or remedial education, which in itself is a risk factor for dropping out. At the same time, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) observed that first generation students can be remarkably resilient. Despite entering

college at a disadvantage, many first generation students experience personal growth that surpasses that of their more advantaged peers. Being part of a community college culture where students have high educational aspirations has a powerful impact on students' future plans (Pascarella, Wolniak, & Pierson, 2003). The positive impact is most pronounced for students who initially had no plans to continue their education beyond an associate degree.

While the figures clearly show an increasing presence of African American women on community college campuses, Rosales and Person (2003) observed that black women in higher education are "either labeled and responded to as 'blacks' or 'women'. . . but rarely viewed and understood fully as 'black women'" (pp. 53-54). They argue that the advancement of black women in higher education has been exaggerated to the extent that they are not seen as needing specific services and supports. According to the authors, most of the programs and services that assist black women are offered in one of six settings: women's centers, multicultural centers, counseling and health services, cultural programs, student activities, and educational equity-academic support programs. Several highly effective programs cited by Rosales and Person were designed for African American women, while others are more generic but are nonetheless effective.

A persistent problem is that despite a growing body of empirical evidence on best practices for retaining students regardless of their socio-demographic profiles, many (or most) institutions seem to adhere to outmoded program models. Alternately, the programs exist but are poorly publicized and hence underutilized by students who stand to derive the most substantial benefits (Karp, O'Gara, & Hughes, 2008). Illustrating this point, researchers conducting a study of a mentoring program for African American students at a California university found a natural control group: students who were not part of the program because they were unaware of it

(Brittian, Sy, & Stokes, 2009). Several control group students expressed interest in future involvement in the mentoring program. According to Brittian et al., many students may fail to take advantage of mentoring programs or other campus activities either because they lack knowledge of the available programs or because they feel such programs are only for students experiencing academic or psychosocial difficulties. In reality, involvement in campus programs fosters academic and social integration and may ultimately make a difference in whether or not the student successfully graduates.

Student Support Programs and Services

ACT has been undertaking surveys investigating *What Works in Student Retention* since 1980 (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). The first report disclosed three key areas deemed essential to student retention: (a) academic stimulation and assistance; providing students with challenging learning opportunities and adequate academic support, (b) personal future building; referring to the identification of students' goals and direction, and (c) involvement activities; encompassing a broad array of available programs and services. Institutions vary tremendously in the extent that they adopt empirically supported retention strategies. Those with the most comprehensive and strategically targeted services generally enjoy the highest retention rates.

The strategies deemed to contribute the most to the retention of community college students fall under three headings: (a) academic advising; including strategic advising designed for specific student populations, (b) learning support; including the presence of a comprehensive learning lab or center, required developmental or remedial courses, tutoring, and reading, writing, and mathematics centers or labs, and (c) assessment; including mandated placement testing (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). These same practices ranked as the top three retention strategies in the 2010 community college report (ACT, 2010a). A separate report was compiled

for community colleges where the percentage of black students was 20% or higher with the same result (ACT, 2010b).

Findings from the 2007 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), the first year the survey was designed to identify what services students should be receiving but are not, painted a picture that contrasts sharply with the identified most effective retention practices (Ashburn, 2007). Despite the fact that students have systematically ranked academic advising as the most important service community colleges can offer their students, more than half of the CCSSE respondents did not talk with an advisor about their educational goals during their first month on campus and about one-third did not participate in orientation. According to findings from the second annual Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE), only 58% of new community college students took an orientation course either on campus or online during their first semester (CCSSE, 2010). Poor academic advising is a common complaint (Karp, O’Gara, & Hughes, 2008; McArthur, 2005). The absence of early academic advising has been implicated as a cause of dropout after the first year (Ashburn, 2007). CCSSE director, Kay McClenney, refers to the institutional failure to provide students with proper supports to promote their success as “educational malpractice” (p. A30).

The most startling finding was that more than one-third of the students said they had not taken any course placement assessment tests after a month in college in spite of institutional mandates adopted by most community colleges (Ashburn, 2007). Although some students are exempt from taking the tests due to their SAT or ACT scores, their numbers fall far below the proportion of students who reported not taking the tests. On the other hand, the findings also showed that academically underprepared students were the most academically integrated and made extensive use of the available resources. From one perspective, this highlights the extra

effort required of academically underprepared students. According to McClenney, however, the evidence shows that only the most dedicated, hardworking, high risk students return for the spring semester when CCSSE is conducted. There is also the possibility that the emphasis on the provision of academic supports for underprepared students may inadvertently disengage students who do not require those services (Derby & Smith, 2004).

There are curious discrepancies between the perceptions of students and faculty regarding the likelihood that certain conditions may cause students to drop out (CCSSE, 2010). In fact, the faculty members see far more barriers than the students, suggesting a pessimistic or cynical attitude about their students' prospects for success. While the overwhelming majority of faculty members (83%) consider it likely or very likely that full-time employment would cause their students to withdraw, only 38% of the students agree. Similarly, substantial proportions of faculty believe students would withdraw due to caring for dependents (73%), being academically unprepared (79%), or lacking finances (79%). Among the students, the figures are 28% for caring for dependents, 19% for being academically unprepared, and 48% for lacking finances, the last figure highlighting the importance of finances in community college students' academic futures.

The disparities in the perceptions of students and faculty are reflected in earlier ACT research showing that college administrators are more inclined to attribute attrition to student characteristics than to institutional features (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). This pattern emerged across institutional types. The community college representatives identified only two institutional features with at least a moderate impact on attrition: the amount of financial aid and employment opportunities. However, they cited a long list of student attributes responsible for attrition including inadequate college preparation, lack of motivation to succeed, inadequate

financial resources, poor study skills, excessive job demands, and family responsibilities. Colleges with high retention rates typically provide students with services that effectively counteract these obstacles to success. Something as simple as onsite child care may be critical to the educational success of adult women (Johnson et al., 2000). Programs designed for African American women emphasize personal and cultural strengths, providing a sharp contrast to the deficit perspective through which disadvantaged students have historically been viewed (Constantine & Greer, 2003; Bradley & Sanders, 2003; Jones, 2009; Rosales & Person, 2003; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

Influences on Persistence

Fike and Fike (2008) investigated the factors associated with first to second semester and first to second year retention in a sample of 9,200 first-time students enrolling in an urban Texas community college over a four-year time period. Approximately two-thirds of the students were assigned to developmental mathematics and 22% took developmental reading classes. One-third of the students took one or more courses online. A majority of the students (60%) received financial aid and three-quarters of the students were first generation college students.

Taking a development course, specifically passing developmental reading, proved to be the foremost predictor of student retention. Fike and Fike (2008) note that this finding is not surprising in view of the fact that being capable of reading and understanding college level material is essential for success in any college class. The students who successfully passed the developmental reading course and those who entered college with the requisite reading skills were both likely to continue their education. The pattern for taking a developmental math course was less predictable. Not taking a developmental mathematics course decreased the probability of persisting which would not be unsurprising if this group was limited to students who had no

need for the course. However, even those students who did not complete the developmental math course were more likely to persevere than those who supposedly began their college coursework with adequate mathematical knowledge and skills. This finding contrasts with other research on developmental mathematics (Waycaster, 2001). On the other hand, some students complain that developmental mathematics courses are tedious and simplistic (Barbatis, 2008). Being compelled to take a course they view as a glorified high school class is especially frustrating to adult students.

Another interesting finding was that passing a developmental writing course had a significant impact on first to second year retention but less effect on retention from the first to second semester (Fike & Fike, 2008). It is possible that the way the courses were taught played a role in the pattern. Successful developmental students prefer student-centered, inquiry oriented courses that promote engaging discussions among the participants (Barbatis, 2008, 2010; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Wilmer, 2009). A developmental writing course can provide a forum for adult women to articulate, in writing, their personal experiences, motivations for entering college, and aspirations for themselves and their families (Maddox, 2006).

Taking online courses had a decisive positive impact on student retention (Fike & Fike, 2008). Community colleges are in the vanguard of distance learning and the convenience and flexibility of online courses have obvious appeal to students juggling work, family, and educational responsibilities. While the growth of community colleges and the growth of online learning are two independent trends, they represent parallel phenomena arising in response to the increasing numbers of adult, part-time, and off-campus students (Shugart, 2008).

Though less than 4% of the students were involved with Student Support Services, the TRIO program, designed to increase retention among low-income and first generation students

and students with physical or learning disabilities, the findings showed that the program had a positive impact on persistence among those students (Fike & Fike, 2008). Financial aid also proved to be a positive factor in boosting persistence. Noting that findings are mixed regarding the positive or negative effects of financial aid, Fike and Fike surmise that this reflects the broad range of financial aid programs and packages. They also note that the existing research leaves numerous gaps in understanding how financial aid influences students' decisions to reenroll or drop out of college.

Traditional Age Students versus Adult Students

Sorey and Duggan (2008) investigated the respective factors influencing persistence among traditional age students and adult students on campuses within the Virginia community college system. Each of the four campuses has a unique profile: two are suburban, one is urban, and one serves a rural community. Two samples of students were randomly chosen to represent traditional age students and adult students, classified as those 25 years or older. One limitation of the study is low response rate, producing a sample of only 68 traditional students and 55 adult learners from a pool of 350 students from each group.

In a remarkable departure from conventional wisdom and most empirical evidence, Sorey and Duggan (2008) found that social integration was the most powerful factor in the persistence of the adult learners; nontraditional students craved more social interaction while academic integration was a driving force in persistence for the younger group. In fact, contrary to most predictions, academic integration was the least important factor in persistence among the adult student group. One possible explanation is that persistence was higher for students enrolled in technical or occupational certificate programs, programs which tend to attract working adults seeking to upgrade their skills.

Other findings are more consistent with the existing evidence. It is noteworthy that social support and encouragement, defined as “a student’s perceived level of encouragement and support received from significant others in completing a college degree and completing a college degree from the present institution,” exerted a significant positive impact on persistence for both student groups (Sorey & Duggan, 2008, p. 92). The main distinction was that this support and encouragement was the overarching factor in the persistence of the younger students but exerted a less powerful but still important influence for the older group. This may imply that the older students are more independent and therefore rely less heavily on others’ encouragement and support. Overall, Sorey and Duggan found that the dynamics involved in predicting persistence among the adult students were much more complex than the pattern for the traditional age students. In addition to stressing the need for research that examines persistence in each group independently, they call for more longitudinal research into persistence among community college students, noting that some of the students who left might reenroll at a future point.

First Year Seminars and Orientation

First year seminars have proliferated since 1990 and a sizable body of research attests to their effectiveness in enhancing students’ persistence (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). A review of research undertaken by Pascarella and Terenzini affirmed their success in boosting first to second year college persistence. A longitudinal study of students participating in first year seminars between 1973 and 1996 reported significant differences in persistence for 15 of the 23 years. Several other studies produced comparable results. Results from a detailed analysis demonstrated that the probability of seminar participants returning the second year was seven percentage points higher than the rate for non-participants. Another study employing random

assignment found that the reenrollment rate for students attending the seminar was 13 percentage points higher.

Upon reviewing more than 40 studies, Pascarella and Terenzini reached the same conclusion each time, specifically that involvement in a first year seminar had a positive impact on reenrollment (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). Controlling for pre-college characteristics decreased the effect to some degree but did not neutralize it completely. The authors propose that the mechanism accounting for the positive benefits lies in the opportunity for informal student-faculty interactions offered by first year seminars. Students in surveys and focus groups consistently report a desire for more opportunities for interactions with faculty and express a preference for instructors who facilitate active involvement in class discussions (CCSSE, 2010). Although the vast majority of students know how to contact their instructors outside of class, more than two-thirds of community college students (68%) report that they never discussed ideas with their instructors outside of class.

Orientation

Derby and Smith (2004) explored the impact of taking an orientation course on the retention of community college students; it was followed by a subsequent study by Derby (2007) on the role of the students' ethnic heritage on degree completion. Derby (2004) observed that there had been no prior research on how specific courses influence retention and an orientation course is designed for the purpose of socializing students into the institution. Using Astin's model for classified student retention, Derby and Smith divided the students into four groups: 1) successful students; students who complete an associate degree within two years, 2) dropouts; students who completed less than three semesters of coursework within two years, averaged three or more courses per course load, and had a GPA under 2.03) stop-outs; students who

completed three or more semesters of coursework with a three or more course load average and a GPA higher than 2.0, and who re-enrolled after a break of 1-3 semesters, and 4) persistent students; students who had a three or more course load average and completed four semesters of course work within two years but did not complete the requirements. The sample consisted of 7,466 students drawn from a community college located in the Midwest. Women comprised 53% of the student enrollment.

The findings revealed a distinct relationship between taking an orientation course and completing the associate degree requirements within the two-year time frame. In addition, the students who took the course were also more likely to return after a stop-out and to persist beyond the traditional two-year associate degree period. Derby and Smith (2004) invoked student involvement theory, which proposes that the greater degree of physical and emotional investment students have in their college campus the greater the probability that they will persist to earn a degree. Orientation is structured to help students learn more about the campus and its various resources and become acquainted with other students. The orientation course may also help students formulate their personal goals and intensify their commitment to achieving them in light of the available services and supports.

Derby and Smith (2004) argue that community college retention programs often focus on programs for students who are academically underprepared to the exclusion of students who have sufficient academic preparation. They refer to this paradoxical situation as a “double edged sword” whereby community colleges risk losing academically prepared students before they earn a degree that will enable them to transfer to a four-year college or university but at the same time risk losing students who drop out due to inadequate remediation. Orientation programs have the

advantage of engaging all students and raising each student's awareness of the available programs and services that are best suited to their individual needs.

Derby (2007) extended his research by examining the interaction between the students' ethnicity and participation in the orientation course and their degree completion. A drawback to this line of investigation is that the rural campus is predominately white with only small numbers of African American and Latino students. The sample consisted of 3,205 white, 241 Latino, and 98 African American students. Women accounted for 58% of the students. A majority of the students are employed and less than half of the students receive financial aid. The median age of the students included in the sample was 23.

Derby (2007) noted that an earlier study, focused on African American students, found a significant relationship between taking an orientation course and earning the associate degree. However, in this study, the relationship between taking the orientation course and degree completion among African American students was no higher than chance. For the Latino students, the association was present in the first stage of analysis but dissipated in the more elaborate model. The only significant relationship between orientation and graduation was observed for the white students who comprised the largest student segment by far.

Though Derby (2007) finds these results troubling, he also points out that the small numbers of black and Latino students might simply have been insufficient for demonstrating statistical significance in a quantitative analysis. In the general analysis, students who took the orientation class had 72 times the probability of graduating; taking the orientation class accounted for 30% of the variance in graduation. While it may seem likely that the lack of a significant effect for minority students was an artifact of their small numbers, another possible explanation is that the orientation class was inadequate for addressing the needs of minority

students on a predominately white campus. However, that explanation is speculative and overall, Derby's research, including his studies with African American and Latino students, suggest that an orientation class can have a substantial impact on the educational futures of community college students.

A good orientation seminar should provide students with valuable information on the available programs and services, which can be pivotal to the students' future success (Karp et al., 2008, 2010). In view of the stress experienced by adult community college women, Johnson et al. (2000) advocate including stress management techniques in the orientation program. Despite evidence supporting the positive benefits of orientation programs, findings from CCSSE and SENSE show that many, if not most students, do not participate in orientation programs (Ashburn, 2007; CCSSE, 2010).

Student Success Courses

Developmental education refers to “a broad range of courses and services organized and delivered in an effort to help retain students and ensure the successful completion of their postsecondary education goals” (Boylan & Bonham, 2007, p. 2). Though the terms remedial and developmental are sometimes used interchangeably, remedial courses represent one end of a full spectrum of developmental programs. Other courses offered under the umbrella of developmental education are designed to promote skills and competencies needed for college success such as study skills, learning strategies, and critical thinking. Student success courses fall under this heading. They are now extensively used and are frequently customized to fit the host institution; for example, the courses acquaint students with the available campus resources (Zeidenberg, Jenkins & Calcagno, 2007).

In the Florida community college system, student success courses are known as “student life skills” or “SLS” courses (Zeidenberg et al., 2007). While they are open to all students, the SLS courses are required on some campuses and optional on others. The precise system varies with individual campuses. A descriptive analysis by Windham and her colleagues linked completion of an SLS course with positive student outcomes. Zeidenberg et al. conducted a more detailed analysis of the data, using individual record data of all students who began their studies at a Florida community college in 1999. The researchers tracked the students over 17 semesters to discern the proportion of students who earned a certificate or associate degree during that time frame or who transferred to the Florida State University System or persisted into the 5th year. Zeidenberg et al. noted that their research strategy differed from the Windham study in one important way. While Windham and her colleagues only focused on students who completed the SLS course, Zeidenberg et al. explored the effect of enrolling in the course. Multivariate analysis was utilized to control for student factors that could affect the outcome. The analysis showed that enrolling in an SLS course had a marginal but nonetheless positive statistically significant effect on the probability that a student would earn a degree or certificate, persist, or transfer to a four-year program. Zeidenberg et al. (2007) found that for all students, taking the SLS course raised the probability of persisting by 8%. For students who did not take remedial courses, the figure was 7% and for those who did take remedial courses, the increase was 10%. With regard to transfer, the course resulted in a 3% increase for all students and for students who took remedial courses and a 5% increase for students who were not involved in remedial courses. Zeidenberg et al. acknowledged that their study did not examine why the SLS course led to superior outcomes but they surmised that it provided underprepared students with useful knowledge and skills that enabled them to meet the demands of college coursework.

Zeidenberg et al. 2007) recommended qualitative and quantitative research to illuminate the mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of student success courses. O’Gara, Karp, and Hughes (2009) explored the perspectives of students who took student success courses offered by two urban community colleges located in the Northeast. Both institutions serve high proportions of economically disadvantaged and minority students. The students were randomly chosen from all first-time students who entered the colleges in fall 2005 and persisted into the spring of 2006. A total of 44 students participated in the first set of interviews and 36 were involved in a follow-up interview, including six who were no longer enrolled. Interviews with executives from each institution, including the president and vice president of student services, were undertaken to gain additional understanding of the available services.

According to O’Gara et al. (2009), the students found the student success courses useful in a number of ways. The courses provided them with valuable information about the available resources on campus, helped them cultivate important skills, and facilitated the development of beneficial relationships. The foremost benefit of the course was that it provided a convenient one-stop location for obtaining needed information that would otherwise have been gathered in ad hoc ways. Without the course, many students did not know where to turn for information they needed, with the result that they obtained incomplete information or did not have the information they needed on time. Having immediate access to information on course selection and graduation requirements was especially beneficial.

Learning to master time management and study skills and cultivate positive academic habits were additional benefits of the class (O’Gara et al., 2009). Additionally, a number of students told how the student success course helped them build relationships with their peers and professors, simultaneously fostering social and academic integration. The class was also

designed to promote the students' academic involvement in activities and discussions, which boosted the students' self-confidence. Several students reported forming close friendships with peers they met in the class. As described by O'Gara et al., the most important benefits of the class were psychosocial. Beyond the concrete information on campus resources, the confidence the students gained from the class enabled them to use their own initiative in accessing services such as tutoring and advising. The overall finding was that the student success class served as a powerful force for helping the students deal with the challenges of college life.

Stress and Coping

Pierceall and Keim (2007) investigated the extent of stress experienced by 212 students attending two Illinois community colleges. The researchers deliberately chose groups of class sections that were most likely to create a heterogeneous sample. The instrument utilized was the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), which is used extensively in studies of stress among college students. The PSS was accompanied by a demographic survey that also asked the students' educational plans, confidence in attaining their educational goals, common coping techniques, and interest in stress reduction workshops or other resources offered by the college.

Three-quarters of the students exhibited moderate levels of stress, which Pierceall and Keim (2007) noted is comparable to a study of university students. Similarly, the 12% of the students who fell into the high stress category is not unusual for a college population. Pierceall and Keim had expected the nontraditional students to report higher levels of stress than their younger counterparts due to the consequence of juggling multiple roles; however the two groups of students did not differ on the degree of perceived stress. There was a gender difference, with women reporting higher levels of stress than men, despite the fact that the women and men were taking the same number of credit hours and the women even had slightly higher GPAs. This

trend was also consistent with the university study which reported higher levels of stress among female students.

Nearly two-thirds of the students were planning to transfer to a baccalaureate degree program. The prospective transfer students were slightly more stressed than those who were not planning to transfer, although the difference fell short of significance. Pierceall and Keim (2003) surmised students, intending to transfer, might feel more pressure as they get closer to the actual transfer process. Students who were not confident about achieving their academic goals reported high levels of stress. This finding is not surprising given that high self-efficacy acts as a buffer against stress (Bandura, 1997). Most of the students used positive coping strategies such as seeking social support from family and friends and engaging in physical exercise and recreational activities. At the same time, Pierceall and Keim (2003) found a substantial number of students who turned to unhealthy coping techniques such as drinking (39%), smoking (36%), and using illicit drugs (15%). More than one-third of the students expressed interest in stress reduction workshops or additional information. Notably, these students had significantly elevated stress levels compared to the students who were not interested in the workshops. Pierceall and Keim (2003) suggest that community colleges explicitly provide students with information about academic and personal stress, including how to recognize stress and tips for effective coping strategies. Posting such information on a website offers a way of reaching all students. Classes that include stress management techniques, particularly time and life management skills, offer another option for helping students deal with stress. Courses of this type are part of a comprehensive developmental education program (Boylan & Bonham, 2007). Wellness education classes provide the ideal venue for stress management techniques. Pierceall and Keim (2003) suggest that student groups brainstorm ideas for stress management programs

which they can conduct under the guidance of faculty and staff. They also raise the suggestion that the administration provide counselors and advisors with training to enhance their proficiency in helping students deal with stress.

Counseling Strategies / Adult learners

Gary et al. (2004) described a counseling and support program created to meet the needs of adult female and minority college students. The program is part of a collaborative project between a New Jersey public university and local public school districts that recruit African American and Latina teachers' aides to earn bachelor's degrees and credentials for teaching special education. To remove any perceived stigma attached to the idea of counseling, the services are provided by faculty counselors rather than counseling center staff. The brief counseling program was supplemented with referrals for long-term counseling, medical treatment, tutoring, child care, and other services brought up by the participants. During the requisite counselor-led, monthly, themed support group meetings, the participants discussed issues pertinent to adult learners, including balancing multiple responsibilities, setting priorities, coping with guilt over missing family activities, having realistic expectations, and dealing with family, work, and personal crises. Some groups were led by graduate interns who served as role models for success.

The program also involved psycho-educational group sessions, which Gary et al. (2004) consider especially beneficial for adult students. Exercises and simulations were key components of the sessions which included stress management, time management, conflict resolution, and relationship enhancement skills. The program, built on the participants' natural support networks and the faculty counselors, provided the participants with information on all the available resources and encouraged their involvement with formal and informal supports.

The powerful support systems that arose from the program provided the participants with services ranging from academic assistance to stress management to child care.

Over four years, the program enrolled 41 students, 82% female, 98% minority, and 15% first generation Americans (Gary et al., 2004). A program evaluation conducted at the four-year mark demonstrated the program's success; twenty-nine percent of the participants had graduated and 47% were still enrolled. Most who left the program cited personal reasons. Using six-year graduation rates, 61% of the program participants graduated at year six, a figure far surpassing the 41% six-year graduation rate for full-time traditional students. The program graduates credited their success to the uniquely tailored services they received. In particular, they lauded the benefits of counseling, peer groups created for adult learners, and accessible faculty members.

Culturally Tailored Interventions

Bradley and Sanders (2003) described a *sista* counseling intervention designed for African American female college students. The intervention builds on the strong social support networks that often serve as an essential resource for promoting resilience in the face of adversity. The authors note that group counseling and support groups have been hailed as “the treatment of choice for African American female students” (p. 187). At the same time, they find it unfortunate that there has been relatively minimal attention to individual counseling because college counseling centers do not always offer group sessions, or their counselors may not have the training to lead groups for African American women. African American students, male and female, tend to have low utilization of college counseling, which many researchers attribute to perceptions that the counseling provided by white counselors would be less satisfying and less relevant than counseling provided by African Americans.

The model proposed by Bradley and Sanders (2003) offers a way of adapting individual counseling to the needs and preferences of African American female students by enlisting the active involvement of members of their informal social networks. In a *sista* intervention, the client's close friends or relatives not only provide active support but also use their personal insight to assist the counselor in developing themes for the sessions and raise the client's awareness to thoughts or actions that might be undermining her academic and personal goals.

There are several key conditions that are requisite for enacting a *sista* intervention. First, the client has a support group of friends who are concerned about her welfare. This often becomes apparent during the first stage of the counseling process when the client refers to a group of close friends in discussing social support. According to Bradley and Sanders (2003), the counselor can appraise the importance and utility of the *sista* support system by listening to the client and asking her to reflect on significant others in her life (p. 189). The second very essential condition is that the client is receptive to the idea of having her sister friends come to the counseling session. Beyond giving consent to the idea, it must be clear that the client understands the terms of the *sista* intervention. Third and equally important, from an ethical standpoint, the client and support group are advised before the meeting about confidentiality. Bradley and Sanders (2003) provided the case example of a student who was referred to the campus counseling center by two close friends. The student was feeling depressed because her grades had fallen, jeopardizing her academic scholarship. Her friends accurately ascribed her depression to the recent breakup of a relationship. With their empathy and support they were able to break down her denial. The counselor recognized the underlying themes of denial and isolation. He minimally intervened in the interactions between the three friends, and at the end of the session he summarized the session and praised the strength and power of the women's

friendship ties and support for each other. The themes that arose during the session became building blocks for future therapy sessions with the young woman.

The success of the *sista* intervention is contingent on the client's willingness to include her friends and on strict adherence to ethical standards for confidentiality and disclosure. According to Bradley and Sanders (2003) it is also essential that the counselor is aware that the client's support network is more closely linked with her cultural and social reality than the counselor (p. 191). The authors find this type of intervention especially advantageous when the counselor and client do not have the same ethnic and cultural background. Given the high proportion of low-income and first generation students attending community colleges it is also possible that the counselor and client may share the same racial or ethnic heritage but come from different social classes with different experiences. The client's social support network acts as a bridge between cultures. It is also important to note that cultural sensitivity is required for implementing a *sista* intervention. There appears to be no empirical evidence supporting the *sista* intervention beyond case studies, but properly conducted, it seems like a promising strategy for helping African American community college students achieve their educational goals.

Concurring with the idea that successfully working with African American college women entails developing culturally tailored programs that go beyond conventional college counseling approaches, Jones (2009) elaborated on *Claiming Your Connections: Life Affirming Strategies for Women of Color (CYC)*. Describing the program as "culturally congruent", Jones defines cultural congruence as denoting "the integration of cultural attitudes, beliefs, and values of black women into the intervention and the continuous promotion of skills, practices, and interactions throughout the group process to ensure sessions are culturally relevant and competent" (p. 159). CYC is based on a "strengths perspective of psychosocial competence"

that emphasizes and builds on the internal resources (abilities, skills, and knowledge) that enable people to cope with stressful life events and promote the attainment of personal goals while contributing to psychosocial health and well-being. Jones describes this approach as the antithesis of traditional views that attribute the adjustment difficulties of African American women to “psychological and social deficiencies” (p. 159).

Psychosocial competence is central to social cognitive theory, which is used extensively in educational psychology (Bandura, 1997). CYC is unique in that it employs an Africentric model for framing the difficulties experienced by black women. Jones (2009) finds this paradigm especially applicable to the situation of black college students. Along with the Africentric paradigm, Tyler’s model of psychosocial competence, which encompasses attitudinal and behavioral dimensions, provides the theoretical underpinning to CYC. The specific facets of Tyler’s model, used in Jones’s study, are locus of control (attitudinal) and active coping (behavioral). While acknowledging that there is a tremendous degree of individual variation among African Americans, Jones asserts that there is also widespread endorsement for the Africentric perspective based on the view that “individuals and groups have strengths that can be enhanced; that individual problems are often structural in origin; that differences between individuals and groups are assumed and accepted; and that collective identity supersedes the individual” (Beckett & Lee, cited in Jones, 2009, p. 161).

Jones (2009) developed CYC based on her experiences with African American college women. Adjustment issues are not unique to any particular student group as illustrated by the array of programs and services provided on most college campuses. However, as Bradley and Sanders (2003) observed, the individual counseling commonly used by campus counseling is rarely culturally tailored. CYC is specifically designed to foster internal locus of control and

increase the use of active coping strategies from a culturally relevant perspective uniquely focused on the needs and experiences of black women. Jones examined the effectiveness of CYC in a study of 76 undergraduate women. The study was open to women between 17 and 24 years who identified as black, African American, Caribbean, Latina, African, or black of other cultural or national heritage and who reported having problems adjusting to campus life and dealing with stress related to issues such as racism, sexism, discrimination, finances, and lack of access to resources and supports.

The participants were randomly assigned to the 10-week CYC psychoeducational program or to a control group at each of four study sites. Jones (2009) decided that a group of ten women was the best size for maximum effect. African American licensed professional and psychology and social work graduate students, trained in group counseling techniques, facilitated the group sessions. The 90-minute sessions captured elements of the multiple identities in Collins's (2000) concept of intersectionality. Each session focused on themes related to black women's psychosocial development and literature written by black authors was used to highlight concepts under each theme. The program ended with a termination ritual during the final session. The strength, resilience, and compassion of black women were prominent themes.

The instruments used for the study included the PSS, Rotter's Internal-External Locus of Control Scale (RIE), and Tyler's Behavioral Attributes of Psychosocial Competence Scale-Condensed Form (BAPC-C), along with a demographic questionnaire. Supporting the efficacy of the program, Jones (2009) observed a decline in the stress experienced by the intervention group, while the stress reported by the control group members remained at the same level over the course of 10 weeks. Jones noted that the reduction in stress enjoyed by the program participants is consistent with the findings of a prior study conducted with black women as well

as the general empirical literature on group counseling. Despite this positive trend, however, the intervention did not make a significant difference in the participants' locus of control or utilization of active coping strategies. Jones points out that locus of control is deeply ingrained and thus a ten-week intervention might be insufficient to alter it. Similarly, a longer time frame might be needed to change coping patterns to which individuals have become accustomed. Nevertheless, the CYC participants showed some evidence of more internal locus of control at the end of the program while the control group participants showed an increase in externality. According to Jones, one limitation of the CYC program is that it did not address Bandura's (1997) four sources of self-efficacy. Bandura distinguished locus of control and self-efficacy by stating that locus of control focuses on outcomes while self-efficacy focuses on beliefs. Additionally, self-efficacy is domain specific in contrast to the more global nature of locus of control. Still, there is considerable overlap between the two concepts in that high self-efficacy and internal locus of control both imbue individuals with confidence that they can overcome obstacles and achieve their personal goals. The four influences on self-efficacy are mastery experiences, vicarious learning or modeling, social persuasion, which includes verbal support, encouragement and feedback, and the degree of physiological arousal one experiences in carrying out a particular task. That is, someone with high self-efficacy is likely to feel more relaxed and less anxious while the reverse is true for someone with low self-efficacy. Jones (2009) envisions future research into how the sources of self-efficacy can be integrated into the CYC program with the goal of decreasing external locus of control.

Jones (2009) also seeks to incorporate certain problem solving and coping skills that have been found effective in working with black clients, into the CYC program. These elements are: (a) cognitive and emotional debriefing; adaptive reactions by African Americans in their efforts

to manage perceived environmental stressors, (b) spiritually centered coping, (c) collective coping; denoting the use of group centered coping activities to decrease stress, and (d) ritual centered coping; involving the application of Africentric rituals to coping with stressful situations. The CYC study was designed as a preliminary exploration that can serve as a springboard for further research.

Students' Perspectives

Bauman et al. (2004) surveyed 53 adult learners, majoring in humanities or social sciences, at a research university to gain insight into their reasons for pursuing their degree programs, the probability of their utilizing services customized to the needs of nontraditional students, and the nature of social support they received from friends and relatives. Like most adult students, the respondents were primarily motivated to return to school by job-related and family issues. Based on their motivation, it is not surprising that career counseling emerged as their top priority. More than three-quarters (76%) of the respondents said they were likely or very likely to utilize career counseling services. Notably, stress management workshops ranked second to career counseling, cited by 57% of the group. In descending order, other preferred services included a financial aid workshop, a lending library for nontraditional students and orientation for nontraditional students (53% each), time management workshops (51%), study skills workshops (45%), personal counseling (42%), financial assistance with child care (40%), and support groups for adult learners (40%).

In terms of social support, more than 60% of the respondents said they received powerful support from friends and relatives (Bauman et al., 2004). This support was manifest in various forms including appraisal support, information support, and instrumental support. The relationships analyzed by the study showed that respondents, who had less social support, were

somewhat more inclined to favor using formal supports and also demonstrated that respondents, who reported a greater extent of social support, had somewhat higher GPAs. The most striking finding is the high degree of endorsement for a range of services tailored specifically for adult learners, especially career counseling.

Social and Academic Integration

Karp, Hughes, and O’Gara (2008) disagree with critics who contend that Tinto’s (1993) model is not applicable to the situation of community college students, arguing that social and academic integration are important to the success of all students. Rather than discarding Tinto’s theory, the model can be adapted to the situation of adult learners or the new traditional students. Karp et al. cited an analysis of data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) demonstrating that both social and academic integration influenced the persistence of community college students, and more importantly, that social and academic integration were not as distinct as is often assumed. Study groups and learning communities represent informal and formal structures, respectively, that simultaneously promote academic and social integration.

Karp, Hughes, and O’Gara (2008) explored the mechanisms that facilitate academic and social integration with the students who participated in the student success course study (O’Gara et al., 2008). Integration was defined as “having a sense of belonging on campus” (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2008, p. 7). Most of the students (70%) felt a sense of belonging. Only 13 students did not seem attached to the campus. These perceptions affected the students’ decisions to reenroll. Out of 40 students, whose enrollment status was available, close to 90% who felt integrated, returned the next year compared to just over two-thirds for those who were less integrated. Karp et al. pointed out that these figures exceed typical persistence rates.

Information networks emerged as a powerful source of integration (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2008; Karp & Hughes, 2008). These were defined as “social ties that facilitate the transfer of institutional knowledge and procedures” (Karp, Hughes & O’Gara, 2008, p. 8). The members of these networks included peers and faculty whose interactions effectively transmitted information. Sixty-one percent of the students were part of an information network, meaning they had a particular person they could turn to for information, they obtained information from faculty or other students, or they sought information via campus social networks or information chains. The overwhelming majority of the integrated students (84%) were involved with information networks.

Information networks were especially valuable for raising the students’ awareness of important resources such as financial aid or tutoring services. A notable advantage of the information network was that the students felt more comfortable using services they learned of from peers. The overall result was that the students felt more confident about their ability to navigate the campus. The informal networks promoted academic integration by keeping the students informed about courses, course registration, graduation requirements and other elements of the academic environment. Overall, there were three key advantages to having information networks. First, the information networks made the campus seem friendlier and more manageable to the students (Karp & Hughes, 2008). Second, the information networks were social in nature, which increased the students’ enjoyment of the time they spent on campus. Third, the information networks aided the students in accessing important information and sources of support.

Of particular note, the student success course was cited by many students as the primary source of their information networks (Karp & Hughes, 2008). Thus the positive impact of the

student success course extends far beyond the knowledge and skills acquired through the course and indirectly had an enduring impact on their academic futures. Components of the student success course included the presence of guest speakers and guided tours of numerous college offices, along with activities that encouraged assertion, involvement, collaboration, active learning, and the development of social relationships. Karp and Hughes emphasize that community colleges have the power to create structures that have a powerful positive impact on the college experience of students who begin their college careers at a social and academic disadvantage.

Building on their research into the social and academic integration of community college students, Karp et al. (2008) reported that disadvantaged students, framed as students who begin higher education with low levels of social and cultural capital and who make use of the available resources and supports, are able to overcome their initial disadvantage and progress toward their educational goals. However, these students often have more limited access to campus services than those who more advantaged to start with. Without intervention the result is the reinforcement and perpetuation of social inequities. A particularly insidious aspect of this effect is that lacking knowledge of the available resources, the disadvantaged students are unaware that there are structural barriers to their achievement. Due to this unawareness, they attribute their difficulties to personal inadequacies.

A cohesive mechanism for facilitating students' access to the existing resources, a role served by the student success course, for example, plays a powerful role in correcting inequities based on differences in social and cultural capital. Karp (2011) elaborated four non-academic support mechanisms that promote the success of community college students. The first mechanism is creating social relationships. This mechanism includes activities that foster

interactions between students and faculty and among students and help students feel a sense of belonging. The second mechanism involves clarifying aspirations and enhancing commitment so that students have clear goals to strive for and encouragement for staying committed to achieving those goals. The third mechanism is developing college know-how, which refers to the knowledge and skills learned in the student success course. Finally, making college life feasible refers to activities that help students meet the various challenges that arise outside of the learning environment. All four mechanisms have a sound empirical evidence base. Specific practices Karp recommends include learning communities and enhanced or intrusive advising as well as the student success course.

Experiences of Successful Students

Barbatis (2008, 2010) explored the perceptions of community college students who entered Florida International University, inadequately prepared for college coursework, and went on to graduate or transfer to a baccalaureate program regarding their community college experience. A cornerstone of that experience was involvement in developmental education and in the First Year Experience (FYE) Learning Community, based on the theories of Tinto and Astin. Freire's theory of "libratory intervention", in which education is the means of personal liberation, was part of the study's theoretical framework. Students assessed as in need of remediation in the three major subjects of reading, English, and mathematics have the option of participating in the FYE. Though relatively few students have taken the course since its inception in 2003, more than two-thirds complete remedial classes and progress academically, and seven students (7%) have graduated or transferred to a university program. Interviews with the seven successful students were augmented with archive data from the institutional records.

A total of 17 women and five men, ranging in age from 19 to 46 years, were interviewed for the project.

Four themes arose from the interviews: precollege characteristics, external supports and community influences, social involvement, and academic integration. One FYE participant described herself as a “very resilient person,” who overcame obstacles by “telling myself...I’m determined to further my college career” and was driven by the feeling “I’m never supposed to give up on anything” (Barbatis, 2008, p. 19). During her most challenging semester she experienced several life events in addition to the academic stressors, but instead of discouraging her, “it just pushed me to keep working hard...I couldn’t see myself not in school” (p. 20). All the participants were either first or second generation immigrants (Barbatis, 2008, 2010). Their cultural heritage influenced their drive to succeed, either because their families stressed the value of education or because they were determined to prove that their minority status would not be a deterrent to success (or both). In fact, parents and other family members played a prominent role in the students’ determination to graduate. Friends also supported their academic success.

Most of the participants had been very involved in extracurricular activities which served as a source of self-confidence and satisfaction (Barbatis, 2008, 2010). However, it was mainly interactions with peers and professors and turning to campus resources that reinforced their persistence, consistent with the findings of Karp and Hughes (2008). All of the participants mentioned at least one faculty member who had an important impact on their experience and described positive qualities they saw in faculty members such as caring, helpfulness, and passionate interest in their discipline, which heightened their motivation to learn (Barbatis, 2008, 2010). Additionally, the students credited a variety of campus resources, for helping them succeed, such as tutors and advisors, math labs, and the FYE program and SLS course.

Becoming friends with a diverse group of students and mastering time management skills were also important factors in integration.

Barbatis (2008) advocates ensuring that underprepared students have access to a range of supports within and outside of the campus as well as designing innovative programs derived from the type of learning experiences found to support academic success and persistence. These experiences include learning communities, leadership retreats, field trips, and other activities that foster academic and social integration. In addition, Barbatis proposes expanding the definition of “learning” to include psychosocial outcomes such as leadership, self-understanding, and citizenship as well as intellectual development.

Johnson (2001) explored the “survival strategies” used by African American women determined to succeed in community colleges. Johnson argues that promoting the success of African American women entails creating services tailored to their specific needs. Designing effective programs starts with consulting the target group to identify the factors that advance or impede their successful degree completion. The participants were ten African American women who were either students or graduates of Seattle Central Community College. The women varied in age, marital status, children, health status, employment, and academic major.

Seven key themes arose from interviews and focus group discussions: (a) support from family members, (b) personal responsibility for success, (c) spirituality, (d) a supportive institutional climate, (e) employment needs and academic aspirations, (f) financial investments and obligations, and (g) the involvement of friends and others in an informal support network. Johnson (2001) noted that each of these themes had several components. For example, personal responsibility encompassed the sub-themes of self-determination and motivation, goal setting, building a foundation, seeking assistance, and minimizing struggle. The women viewed faculty,

advisors, and community college personnel as mentors who helped them access support networks and communicated a message of confidence in their ability to achieve their educational goals.

In essence, the community college representatives validated the women's educational and career aspirations along with their ability to fulfill them (Johnson, 2001). Barnett's (2007) study of urban community college students focused on validation. Higher levels of validation from faculty (being known and valued), good instruction, appreciation for diversity, and mentoring were associated with a greater degree of student integration. Good instruction was the strongest predictor of integration, which had a moderate impact on persistence. The impact of good instruction on integration and persistence is documented by the community college surveys such as Cessie and SENSE (CCCSE, 2010).

Enhanced Advising

Academic advising and targeting specific student populations is one of the most recommended and most effective strategies for bolstering student retention (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Enhanced or intrusive advising is defined as traditional advising augmented in various ways such as having required meetings, lower student-counselor ratios, assigned mentors or counselors, or longer, more intensive counseling sessions (Karp, 2011). McArthur (2005) investigated the implementation of individualized academic advising, the central facet of a student retention-boosting program adopted by the Arts and Humanities (A&H) department at Atlantic Cape Community College (ACCC). For several years prior to the initiative, the retention rate among A&H students was 57% compared to 69% for the rest of the campus. After the strategic advising program was implemented, the retention rates for the A&H students surpassed the other campus departments by three percent.

The A&H students rated their academic advising far more positively than the students in other departments (McArthur, 2005). Many ACCC students said that they were not even aware they had an advisor and many others complained of receiving poor advice, consistent with the Cessie results (Ashburn, 2007). There was a general perception that the advisors lacked knowledge of important issues and lacked concern for the students (McArthur, 2005). In contrast to the negative perceptions of the general ACCC population, the vast majority of the A &H students were confident in their advisors' knowledge and expertise and expressed their appreciation for their faculty advisors in reaching out to them, offering good advice, and helping them accomplish their goals. About two-thirds of the A&H students felt the time they spent with their advisors was worthwhile as compared to barely more than one-quarter of the overall student body. Roughly 67% to 85% of the A&H students gave high ratings to all dimensions of academic advising as compared to 20% to 25% of the general ACCC population. Beyond the students' positive perceptions, the strategic advising program achieved its goal of significantly increasing retentions among the A&H students.

The intrusive advising initiative, described by Smith (2007), was specifically targeted to students with academic or adjustment difficulties. The data-driven initiative was inspired by concerns about high attrition rates at a Northeastern community college, particularly among non-traditional students. In response, members of the Faculty Affairs Committee devised a project involving data collection from a variety of sources and a faculty advisor intervention for at-risk students. In the initial phase, faculty members filled out a brief survey that focused on students' conduct and academic preparation for college coursework. The second phase involved a perception survey, which was taken by a large sample of students. Using the results, ten faculty advisors opted to intervene, based on the principles of "intrusive advising for students identified

as at-risk” (p. 817). This led to the third phase whereby 14 faculty members charted student attendance and behavior in a log spanning two successive semesters (fall 2003 and spring 2004). This was followed by a series of focus groups in which the students discussed their perceptions of classroom conduct, their opinions of teaching, and their overall perceptions of their college experience.

According to Smith (2007), each component independently served as a source of valuable information. Working synergistically, the data offered a useful guide for faculty and staff on the best ways to help the students make a successful transition to college and support them in the goal of successful degree completion. The initial data collection steps identified 49 at-risk students, 71% in their first year of college. Information on these students was given to the faculty advisors who formulated a strategic intrusive advising plan that included: 1) contacting the student early in the semester, 2) discussing points of concern disclosed by the student survey, 3) identifying one or two services such as tutoring or counseling, 4) maintaining consistent contact throughout the academic year, and 5) documenting the advising meetings.

Most of the identified students met with faculty members who helped them acquire the appropriate services (Smith, 2007). One obstacle was that some of the students had competing demands that precluded their meeting with the advisors. In fact, this was a major issue in the focus group discussions. Despite this, the students had positive perceptions of their college experiences and described faculty members as being supportive. The overall findings showed that the advising initiative could effectively help students persevere by linking them with needed resources on campus. As with the students in the A&H department (McArthur, 2005), an additional benefit of enhanced advising was that the students felt that faculty members cared and supported their educational success.

Learning Communities

Learning communities refer to a pair, or group of courses, taken by a cohort of students; they are often connected by a theme and taught by a team of instructors (Karp, 2011). There are various models of learning communities. Some include a student success course or strategically targeted support services. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) conducted a systematic longitudinal 4-year study of the impact of learning communities and their collaborative learning strategies on the college success of academically underprepared, primarily low-income students. The project included thirteen two-year and six four-year colleges in 11 states: California, New York, New Jersey, Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Washington. The evaluation data was drawn from 2,615 learning community students and 3,114 students in comparison classrooms.

The learning community students were far more engaged academically and socially, within and outside of the classroom, than their counterparts in conventional classes (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008). The greater degree of engagement translated into higher rates of persistence. Specifically, the community college students, in learning communities, were almost ten percent more likely to persist and the four-year college students were slightly more than five percent likely to persevere toward their degree. On some campuses, the difference between the learning community students and the comparison group reached 15%. The themes that surfaced in interviews included having a safe and supportive learning environment, peer support and collaboration, feeling a sense of belonging, and learning through reflection and critical thinking. The students commented that their experience enhanced their commitment to fulfilling their educational goals.

Wilmer (2009) observed that few studies of persistence and attrition, among students in developmental education, are aligned with the theories of Tinto or Astin. While research such as the work of Engstrom and Tinto (2008) has documented the success of learning communities, Wilmer (2009) notes that there is virtually no line of research on the impact of learning communities on developmental English students. For exploring this issue, Wilmer chose a pilot learning community in the suburban Western Virginia Community College (WVCC) which was based on English 07, an integrated reading and writing course which was team-taught by a specialist in each area.

The learning community included intrusive advising, active and cooperative learning strategies, a cultural component, a variety of guest speakers, and optional field trips (Wilmer, 2009). The mission of the learning community was to promote academic competence in reading and writing, personal development, and understanding of the college environment and involve the students via the use of the cohort model. As part of the academic advising component, the students were required to meet with one of the two instructors four times over the semester. The study participants were 120 students: 50 members of the learning community and 70 members of a conventional class.

The five subscales of the Institutional Integration Scale (IIS) were utilized to compare the interaction experiences of the two groups of students (Wilmer, 2009). The results showed that the learning community students had significantly higher perceptions of the extent of their peer interactions and faculty interactions. No significant differences were found in terms of perceived faculty concern, academic and intellectual development, and institutional goal commitment, though the overall trend favored the learning community model.

Anecdotal reports supported the superiority of the learning community model, as illustrated by learning community faculty member Susan Taylor's observation that the learning community helped promote the development of "supportive relationships" between students (Wilmer, 2009, p. 64). Taylor observed that her students were interested in the personal lives of their peers as well as in their academic success. Academically, the students supported each other by forming study groups and sharing their notes. Taylor considers the sense of community especially critical to developmental students "who need the security of a welcoming, emotionally safe environment as they transition into their first college experience" (p. 64).

Other faculty members made similar comments about the highly supportive atmosphere of the learning community (Wilmer, 2009). One faculty member commented that the learning community made the professors aware of specific issues confronting their students such as health and financial difficulties. This knowledge allowed them to help the students by connecting them with the appropriate campus resources. Overall, the effectiveness of the learning community model was confirmed by the quantitative empirical evidence and the comments of the faculty members.

James, Bruch, and Jehangir (2006) described their experience of creating an interdisciplinary learning community in a developmental college with a research university. Most of the students were involved with TRIO. The interdisciplinary multicultural learning community was the creation of the three authors who taught writing, Multicultural Relations, and Creativity Art Lab. As collaborative partners they developed their approach from a synthesis of critical pedagogy, social learning theories, and constructive developmental theory. The learning community was founded on three themes: community, identity, and agency. After expounding upon these themes to the students, James et al. (2006) invited them to apply the

themes to exploring the dynamic interaction between individuals and surrounding social structures (such as the institution). The exercise enhanced the students' reflective writing skills and allowed them to articulate their perceptions of themselves, the learning community, the institution, and the greater society. The students' essays clearly displayed critical thinking, imagination, and insight. Their narratives suggested that the sense of belonging they gained from the learning community had a compelling impact on their confidence to express themselves. Based on her experience with the learning community, combined with previous research, Jehangir outlined five key recommendations for designing effective learning communities, regardless of the particular model. First, collectively set clear expectations for being part of a learning community. Second, create opportunities for process-based learning. Third, provide students with opportunities to teach. Fourth, develop a challenging multicultural curriculum with academic foundations and scaffolding. And fifth, pay attention to cognitive and affective knowledge.

Culturally Relevant Learning

Sealey-Ruiz (2007) conducted a qualitative exploration of the experiences of 15 African American women enrolled in a requisite freshman composition course entitled *Translating Experience into the Essay* (TEE). The study took place at the Harlem campus of a liberal arts college whose courses are aimed at adult students and where most of the students are ethnic minority heritage. The study was based on the principles of a culturally relevant curriculum for adult learners and black feminist theory, notably the work of Patricia Hill Collins (2000). Central to Collins's (2000) theory is intersectionality, defined as a type of "analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and age from mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape black women's experiences and, in

turn, are shaped by black women” (p. 299). Over the course of six years of teaching at the campus, Sealey-Ruiz (2007) observed the positive responses of her students, many African American women, to literature portraying the lives of African American women. These observations inspired the study. Notably, Jones (2009) included literature by black authors in the CYC program.

The women in the class spanned a varied age range and Sealey-Ruiz (2007) noted that many “came of age during the turbulent 1960s” and the Civil Rights movement had a powerful impact on their lives (p. 50). These women became animated in discussions about that era and the black-nationalist and black power movements and shared their personal experiences, including painful events in their childhood. The younger women (>40 years) were most energetic in debates about language and popular black culture. All of the women came from poor or working class backgrounds. Based on their identities, Sealey-Ruiz included works by black feminists and civil rights, labor, and religious activists, black, white, Latina, and biracial, from past and present eras. The first weeks of the course involved exercises in community building, which were part of all Sealey-Ruiz’s courses.

Three key themes arose from the study. The most prominent theme was language validation, followed by fostering a positive self-identity and group identity, and self-affirmation or affirmation of goals. Sealey-Ruiz (2007) observed that the curriculum forged a connection between the literature and the women’s personal lives and gave voice to their writing. An interesting phenomenon was that the older women informally assumed a mentor role with their younger classmates. They were especially concerned about the younger women’s academic success. In many cases, they invoked the books they read in the class, quoting from the literature to encourage them or reprimand them if they appeared irresponsible (such as handing in an

assignment late). Their comments were frequently prefaced with, “I always tell my daughter.” Or, “My daughter is around your age” (p. 52). There was a sense of mutual caring and personal accountability combined with collective accountability.

According to Sealey-Ruiz (2007), the culturally relevant curriculum served as a catalyst for enabling the women to “bring their personal experiences to the center of the classroom” (p. 58). While most of the women were overwhelmingly positive toward the course, she acknowledged that two women were neutral. However, these students were dealing with personal issues that caused them to miss many sessions; this is not an unusual phenomenon for adult learners. Sealey-Ruiz views a culturally relevant curriculum, for black women, as a vehicle for empowerment that enhances their potential for success. Even beyond the power of the literature to engage the black female students, the class became an informal learning community where social bonds and self-reflection promoted personal growth and determination, as evidenced by the theme of self-affirmation and affirmation of goals.

Mentoring

Pope (2002) investigated the mentoring experiences of an ethnically diverse sample of 250 community college students (55% female) drawn from 15 community colleges in geographically disparate regions of the U.S. The participants were (69.6%) African American, (11.2%) Latino, (8.8%) Native American, (4.8%) Asian, and (5.6%) multiracial. The average age of the students was 26.8 years. As a group, the students gave high importance of all dimensions of mentoring including formal and informal mentoring, academic and work-related mentoring, and psychosocial support. The Asian students were least likely to have experienced different types of mentoring, which Pope ascribes to the cultural image of Asian students as “always successful” due to their overall high academic performance and graduation rates. The

Latino students were least likely to feel that their institutions had suitable mentors that were a cultural match. In general, the more value the students perceived in mentoring, the more likely they were to report that there were available mentoring programs at their campus (Pope, 2002). This seems to imply that the students who really desired formal mentoring were more aggressive in seeking out mentors. Nonetheless, the findings disclose a gap between minority students' positive perceptions of mentoring and the available mentors at their institution. Mentoring programs involving African American faculty, alumni, and professionals are strongly recommended for advancing the success of African American female students (Rosales & Person, 2003).

Brittian et al. (2009) explored the effects of mentoring on African American students attending a large public California university. The participants were 183 undergraduate and graduate students, including 36 who were involved in mentoring programs. They were recruited from various campus organizations offering mentoring (such as McNair scholars, Student Diversity Program, and black sororities and fraternities). The participants were assessed on a range of measures, including life events, by means of the *Student Life Events Scale*, academic success (GPA), involvement in leadership and campus clubs and organizations, social support, acculturative stress, and experiences with mentorship.

Brittian et al. (2009) noted that there was no relationship between the students' family backgrounds and their involvement in mentoring. The overwhelming majority of the students (91%) had positive perceptions of their experiences. Seven types of responses captured the students' experiences: (a) opportunities for personal growth, (b) motivation for success, (c) social support, (d) emotional support, (e) negative experiences, (f) positive feedback, and (g) academic resources. A common theme related to social support was that the mentoring relationship was a

type of extended family. Brittian et al. found this especially pertinent for African American students. In fact, the theme of extended family members and social support often arises in the context of supporting African American women on campus (Bradley & Sanders, 2003; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

Only three students reported negative experiences, commenting that mentoring did not fulfill their individual needs. Brittian et al. (2009) found that the mentored and non-mentored students did not differ on psychosocial dimensions, contrary to their expectations. The only difference was that the mentored students had lower GPAs, suggesting that some students may turn to mentoring for academic support. Alternately, according to Brittian et al., some students might assume that mentoring was only for those with academic problems. Many students were unaware that there were mentoring programs on campus. Almost one-third (30%) of the non-mentored students said they had no knowledge of the programs and several said they would have become involved with a mentoring program if they had been aware of them.

Peer Mentoring

Jaswal and Jaswal (2008) described the tiered mentoring system implemented by Bellevue Community College (BCC) in Washington State. With a large diverse population, including many students who work off campus, BCC sought to develop effective strategies for facilitating the students' academic and social integration. BCC had previously tried mentoring programs for new students as well as industry mentoring programs. However, while these programs were successful, they served a minute proportion of students. Sustaining or expanding the programs required financial and human resources beyond the capacity of the institution. The tiered peer mentoring program (TMP) circumvented those obstacles by capitalizing on the

combined efforts of students and staff. Peer mentoring was beneficial to African American women.

In the tiered mentoring program, new freshman are paired with upper level student mentors, who in turn are mentored by professionals in their field of study (Jaswal & Jaswal, 2008). The student mentors undergo extensive training to equip them with the knowledge, skills, and competencies of effective mentors. The comprehensive training program has specific aims and covers issues such as BCC's mission, vision, and values; servant leadership; cross-cultural competency; effective communication skills; team building; academic success strategies; and the available resources on the BCC campus. The student mentors are expected to be disciplined, involved, and carry out a range of activities consistent with the mentoring role. Based on a collaborative model, the TMP mentors act as liaisons between their protégés and the campus academic, financial, and social resources. The mentors were initially volunteers but the program developers deemed it essential to provide them with some compensation, which is a critical factor in keeping the program supplied with dedicated and qualified mentors.

Two TMP student coordinators and one permanent staff member coordinate and oversee the activities of more than 150 student mentors (Jaswal & Jaswal, 2008). The program is self-perpetuating; many students who were protégés decide to become mentors. Data from the summer quarter 2006 through the winter quarter 2007 revealed the retention rate for students, who had advising along with phone contact from TMP mentors upon enrollment, was 81.4%. For students who enrolled with neither advising nor mentoring, the retention rate was 69.6%, and for those who had advising but no interaction with TMP student mentors, the retention rate was 72.6%. Jaswal and Jaswal noted that the data were preliminary and did not control for the effects

of student background characteristics or other institutional factors. Indeed, it seems likely that there are other factors involved with retention rates that far surpass most institutions.

A major advantage of the TMP, according to Jaswal and Jaswal (2008), is that the structure is highly flexible, making it easy to scale. The original idea was to expand the project incrementally each year, which makes the effort less challenging and more viable than starting with a large-scale program that might prove unsustainable. According to the authors, the impact of the TMP on campus extends beyond boosting retention rates. The mentors make excellent role models and the collaborative design of the program contributes to the development of a more connected and more motivated campus community.

Conclusion

Community colleges represent a fast growing sector of higher education and African American women are an increasing presence on community college campuses. However, there are few studies that focus specifically on their experiences or on programs strategically targeted to their needs. Rosales and Person (2003) observe that black women are typically conceptualized as black or as women but not as black women. In the community college literature, other identities include adult learner and frequently disadvantaged or first generation student. Given these multiple identities, Collins' (2000) black feminist theory offers a useful framework for understanding the experience of African American women in higher education. Some innovative courses and programs draw from black feminist thought as a theoretical framework.

Some identified best practices in the retention of community college students seem especially applicable for African American women. Learning communities build on the sense of community shared by many African American women and serve as a vehicle for self-expression,

self-reflection, and collaborative learning (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; James et al., 2008). The information networks identified by Karp and Hughes (2008) may be essential to the survival of many community college students. Both information networks and learning communities synthesize academic and social integration. Mentoring is another promising strategy that is frequently recommended for African American college women. Counseling uniquely tailored for adult learners is another promising practice (Gary et al., 2004).

Black women who have succeeded in community college typically have strong inner resources and rich social support networks (Barbatis, 2008, 2010; Johnson, 2001). These internal and external resources foster resilience and enhance the capability of students striving to chart a successful future. There is a growing body of evidence on highly effective practices that work to break down structural barriers and promote the success of students who have historically been underrepresented in higher education. This study strives to provide insights, from the participants, to share with community colleges to enhance the development and implementation of appropriate resources to provide supportive learning environments, support networks, and programs and services for these students, regardless of age or other socio-demographic factors.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the study's qualitative research design, including the methodology, methods, sample selection, instrumentation, data collection, and the data analysis procedures. Narrative inquiry was used to identify the myriad of struggles of participating African American female community college graduates self-identified as being "in crisis" during their enrollment. This research method facilitated the expression of personal descriptors in the participants' own voices, and it enabled them to tell their stories about the determination it took to prevail in the face of adversity and successfully overcome personal crises and ultimately graduate with an Associate of Arts (AA), or Associate in Applied Sciences (AAS) degree.

In today's economy, women can likely expect to make more transitions between career and education, some by choice and others by necessity. Those struggling to get off of public assistance by re-entering the job market and beginning a career for themselves while raising children often will look toward attending community colleges. To face the ensuing changes and manage the transitions successfully, these women will need to make decisions to educate themselves by returning to school to update and enhance their skills. Thus, community college faculty and administrators need to better understand these students so they can provide appropriate support to nurture student retention and successful program completion.

Purpose and Driving Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the persistence and goal achievement of African American females who self-identify as being "in crisis" while attending community college.

Three driving questions guide this study:

1. What self-identified crises did the study participants face while attending the community colleges?
2. How were the study participants aided in their self-identified crises and how did this aid contribute to the students' persistence in their academic program of study?
3. How can community colleges better assist African American female students in crisis to persist and achieve their educational goals?

Research Design

Qualitative Methodology

For this study, the qualitative paradigm was the optimal methodology for gaining insights into how African American female community college students develop the requisite fortitude to persevere and complete their community college education, even when in crisis. Qualitative research allows groups and individuals to share their stories biographically by their own accounts. Collaboration between the researcher and the participants helped to gain the essence of their stories, as well as the factual pieces.

Being characteristically open-ended, democratic, cooperative and mutual in nature, the qualitative research paradigm was appropriate for this study, which seeks the participants' perspectives of their personal experiences while attending community college. One benefit of situating the research in the qualitative paradigm was that it lends itself well to the use of small focused samples that enable the development of rich, thick description. In this regard, this

method and the data collected by it well suited this study. Qualitative research is undertaken when one wants to “empower individuals to share their stories...” (Creswell, 2007, p.40). Nevertheless, qualitative researchers experience challenges of their own. As an admission, this researcher must be prepared to deal with issues including rapport development and vulnerability as her story resembles theirs in so many avenues. The qualitative research paradigm lends itself to scientific exploration by making the researcher a free party to the stories being told during the interview, yielding data that the researcher compiles to produce a holistic view of participant experiences (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2007).

Narrative Inquiry Method

In preparing for this study, the researcher looked at various methods, including the phenomenological research methodology design and carefully considered the most logical and productive approach for gaining insights into the seven participants’ ability to persist through crisis while attending community college. This search led to the selection of narrative inquiry as the research methodology because it enabled a collection of in-depth informative insights, which brought the participants’ stories to life. Narrative studies focus on the life of an individual. Phenomenal studies are rooted in philosophy and seek to understand the meaning of a shared experience as expressed by individuals (Cresswell, 2008). Clandinin and Connelly (2002) characterize narrative inquiry as (a) a method for understanding experience, (b) collaboration that occurs between the researcher and participant, and (c) stories lived and told (p. 20). Narrative inquiry is a methodology for understanding behavior through the storytelling of others. It calls for the researcher to write a narrative of the information, a sort of sequence of events, or an account of the stories told.

Dewey (as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) saw narrative as a tool for the analysis of experience that consists of the ingredients of situation, continuity, and interaction. Situation is described as a combination of the seen, the experience being discussed, and the plot or meaning the participant is attempting to offer by telling the story. Continuity, on the other hand, is a representation of the movement of accounts that reflect how participants' experiences are shaped by prior experiences and how this continues to shape those experiences that follow. Interaction is the manifestation by a participant of her past experience with a story versus her current experience with the similar event. Thus, a narrative inquiry approach was chosen as it most closely fit the purpose of this study which was to examine the persistence and goal achievement (behavior) of a purposeful sample of African American women who self-identify as being "in crisis" while attending community college.

In this narrative study, the researcher was responsible for eliciting the stories from the participants that best illustrate their experience in community college while working through crises. Moreover, the researcher was responsible for understanding the prior events that characterized participants telling of later experiences that influenced their responses during their handling of crises. Additionally, the researcher, during data collection and analysis, wrote the accounts in a manner that denotes the participants' descriptions, with sensitivity to what they were trying to communicate in their stories and an understanding of how they arrived at their observations based on prior experiences.

According to Chase (1995), a narrative may be oral or written with information typically obtained during an interview or in naturally occurring conversation. A narrative may be a short story about a particular event or an extended story about a significant aspect of one's life such as schooling, work, marriage, divorce, childbirth, an illness, or a physical or emotional trauma.

Gergen (as cited in Maraki, 2007) has characterized narrative inquiry as “an understandable story” arranged in a clear, often chronological fashion that enables listeners to recognize intended messages or events (p.2). “Enclosed in a frame [it]... suggests causal linkages that make up the foundation of the story scheme” (Varaki, 2007, p. 2).

The process of developing stories occurs one-on-one and face-to-face with study participants, and it explores issues directionally, inward and outward, backward and forward, in what Dewey referred to as interaction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Inward interaction is defined by “feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions. By outward, we mean . . . the environment. By backward and forward, we refer to temporality – past, present, and future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believe that through narrative inquiry, as researchers collect and record the data, they “experience an experience”, the participant’s experience, through the expression of words and feelings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50).

The structure of this methodology opens up a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” that transports the researcher into the private places of participants’ experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 49). As the participants tell their story, they experience not only the ideas they communicate but also the effects of previous experiences that influenced their responses. Identifying this interaction is a researcher’s responsibility. Without identifying the influences behind the story, the researcher fails to understand the total makeup of the participant’s response. For instance, if the participant describes a time where she experienced criticism from a family member or boyfriend because she failed to meet a financial aid deadline and thus had to wait for the next semester to enter school, her telling of that story is likely to be characterized by the emotions she felt and the impact put on her by the discouraging comments of her loved one.

Should the researcher fail to unearth this prior experience, the element of interaction cannot be represented in the narrative composition prepared by the researcher.

However, as the researcher is armed with the knowledge of interaction and temporality, it is conceivable that such techniques better prepare the researcher to accomplish the telling of her participant's full story and generates a better set of data for later analysis by the researcher. The use of past, present, and future inserts a litmus test to discover optimal impact experiences. For example, the researcher might ask, "Can you think of another circumstance in the past that reminds you of this experience?" Or, "Tell me how you came to this conclusion and how you might use that experience to impact your decision making in the future?" Either of these questions might elicit a follow up that verifies accuracy in interpretation by the researcher.

Selection of the Participants

The participants were selected based on race and gender, specifically African American female, identifying by age the two subsets or groups 21-25 and 40-45 years old. These subsets were chosen, based on age, in order to provide for generational distinctions between experiences and/or interpretational meaning/reactions from crises or values. Participants were also selected based on their ability to explain their experiences with cohesion and a certain amount of brevity. To find the participants, the researcher enlisted the assistance of administrators and community college faculty who could immediately identify individuals that fit the criteria and assist in contacting them to determine their interest in participating in the study. The researcher trusted that this might benefit rapport enhancement as well.

Although the participants selected for this study did not all attend community college during the same period, they all did attend a city of Chicago community college within the last eight years. Two separate community colleges are represented in the study, designated as

community college A and community college B. Three of the participants attended both community colleges A and B before completion of their AA or AAS degrees. All of the participants, with the exception of one, transferred to a four-year university. Of the six participants who transferred to a four-year university, three have graduated with a BA or BS degree and three currently attend universities.

Creswell (2007) advises narrative researchers to choose accessible, willing participants for studies that can bring relevant and useful information to the research topic. Further, Creswell (2007) stresses the importance of selecting participants with the ability to relate information and their relationship to pertinent information within the framework of the topic rather than focusing on the individuals themselves. Participants were chosen for their shared experience of crisis while attending community college. Participants experienced crisis while attending a community college and still graduated from a community college with an AA, or AAS. Finally, the participants live within the greater Chicago area, for accessibility to the meeting site.

Therefore, the participants characterize a “purposeful sample . . . that can best inform the researcher about the problem under examination” (Creswell, 2007, p. 118). Study participants were available and prepared to candidly share crisis events that affected their lives during their tenures at a community college. Any focus on the individual, as a contributor to the study, is a derivative of the crisis events faced that affected their prospects of persistence. Moreover, as the researcher benefited from introductions from faculty and administrators who knew the participants through prior interaction, she benefited from their previously established rapport. This made it easier to call to discuss the study as a somewhat known commodity. The participants were open to addressing the qualifying questions; however, based on the use of attaining names from administrators and faculty, all were willing participants.

Instrumentation

In qualitative methodology, the researcher becomes the instrument. This means the researcher must have the ability to observe behavior and must sharpen the skills necessary for observation and face-to-face interview (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Researchers tend to study what is of interest to them personally. Furthermore, there is a tendency to study that which is consequential to their professional field in order “to verify or falsify existing knowledge” (Mruck & Breurer, 2003, p. 2). The researcher is an African American female who experienced crisis while attending a community college. The numerous challenges she faced during two years at a community college have motivated her interest in seeking a greater understanding of how crisis impedes educational achievement and how others have risen above personal crisis to succeed in their community college education. Narratives from this research are intended to define the personal experiences and key influences that motivated seven participants throughout their academic persistence. The researcher seeks to discover insights that will help community colleges to understand the experiences and obstacles faced by African American female students who are faced with crises. The researcher knows these challenges all too well, having experienced them herself, however she took measures to safeguard against self-insertion of her own feelings into the findings. Among those measures was the use of reflexivity, which is a form of self-reflection, and a detailed follow-up questioning process that enabled the researcher to remain outside of the participant’s storytelling.

Data Collection Method

Creswell (1996) states interviews as one method in qualitative research used to assemble complex pictures of social problems, and consequent understanding of those problems, by allowing participants to convey feelings in their own words and natural surroundings. Narrative

inquiry has an emergent design, permitting participants to be interviewed by use of a form of storytelling that gives voice to their experiences (Creswell, 2007). The researcher interviewed African American females who experienced crisis while attending a community college, overcame those challenges, and then persisted to graduate from a community college. Engaging in an interpretive paradigm to capture relevant data from the seven participants, varying in age and income, unveiled the context and nature of strategies used for surviving crisis. Certain characteristics endemic in the way of life for a majority of African American females emerged during the open ended semi-structured interviews.

Bernard (1988) describes interview techniques as being structured or unstructured to various degrees. Bernard mentions semi-structured interviewing and interviewing protocols, that is, sets of questions or scripts. Frey and Fontana (1991) expanded this classification scheme by noting that interviews may be conducted individually or in groups, may include oral histories, and creative postmodern interviewing, almost verbatim reporting of participants' words.

Interview Procedures

The researcher contacted each of the participants by telephone to arrange a convenient time and location for the interview. Permission to audiotape the interview was also requested. Interview questions were sent electronically to participants one week before the actual interviews, in order to provide them with an opportunity for reflection. Basic demographic information was gathered from study participants, such as age, years of education completed, and family background as part of a transition from the icebreaker into the interview. The questions centered on household makeup, including number of siblings, position of the participant in the birth order, and asking the participants to describe their role in the family's structure.

Following the final explanation of the process, participants were asked to articulate their roles as students and family members, detailing trauma or stress during their time at community college and the manner by which these situations were forestalled or overcome. Participants narrated individual experiences in response to the interview questions. The researcher was careful not to insert her personal experiences while listening to participants' responses. This practice aided the researcher in identifying conversational cues that indicated the need for further questioning. Stories of encouragement and assistance or remedial solutions were told as they shared experiences in overcoming individual life crises. The interview questions are found in Appendix A and the participant consent form in Appendix B.

The researcher procured dependable audiocassette tapes and tape recorders. Additionally, equipment tests were conducted prior to the interviews to ensure the quality of the recordings. Each in-depth one-on-one interview lasted approximately one to one half hour. Prior to beginning the interview, consent forms were signed with the researcher retaining one copy and giving the other copy to the participant.

After each interview, the researcher transcribed the audiotapes. Each participant was subsequently provided a hardcopy of their transcribed interview and asked to review and comment on it for the purpose of ensuring clarity and accuracy. This process also provided participants with sufficient opportunity to ask questions as needed.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher carefully factored ethical considerations into the data collection procedures and the protection of private information offered by the participants. To protect the participants in this study, the researcher complied with the National-Louis University Institutional Research Review Board's guidelines concerning human subjects. Prior to

volunteering for participation in this study, each participant received a copy of the consent form. Participants signed the consent form that detailed the description of the study. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any time. Finally, the researcher is the only person with access to the information which is stored in a secure place. After seven years, all research documents will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

Each of the seven individual's transcribed interviews, interview questions, signed consent forms and field notes were placed in separate folders bearing the name in the order in which the interviews were conducted. The researcher carefully examined comments and direct quotations from the participants' transcriptions to describe their overall experiences and what similarities and differences were in their responses that supported their determination leading to success. Data in field notes, that included the researcher's reflections from each interview, was also analyzed.

Data analysis was driven by the research questions and overall frequency of the given responses. After examining the transcriptions and field notes, the data was grouped in categories as themes emerged and corresponding codes were developed. The researcher coded the data into four themes: Public Assistance (PA), Family Support (FS), Spirituality (SP), and Determination (DE). These four themes emerged as relevant to all of the participants who were interviewed. These categories allowed the researcher to report on each theme and its importance to the participants' success.

This approach to data analysis enabled the researcher to address the research questions posed in the study. The researcher was able to identify key factors relating to these African

American women and their abilities to persist throughout crisis and graduate from community college.

Authenticity and Trustworthiness

Authenticity in qualitative research relates to whether or not techniques to collect data are designed to capture relevant data and whether or not bias exists. Limited amounts of literature exist relative to rapport development and issues of bias that arise from personal involvement in qualitative research; nevertheless, researchers must safeguard against emotional involvement when listening to narratives (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen & Liamputtong, 2007).

Trustworthiness, in qualitative research, relates to credibility and objectivity in data collection, reporting, and analysis. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), a tension exists between the stringent formalist and the narrative inquirer that identifies with societal distinctions.

Formalists argue that participants are incompetent to assess who they truly are due to their lack of supposed objectivity.

Phillion (as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) noted that for the narrative inquirer, there is a possibility for the inadvertent potential to “autobiographically” bias the research with personal interpretations based on cultural relativity, previous experience, or “personal tension” (p. 47). Dewey (as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) states, that as a group, we all are “prisoners caught in the framework of our theories...expectations...past experience; our language” (p. 39). Therefore, objectivity and credibility in data collection establish the standard in the researcher’s objectives and should be her only motivation.

The idea of discovering truth through measures of reliability and validity is replaced by the idea of trustworthiness, rigor and quality in the qualitative paradigm. Qualitative researchers use triangulation to control for bias in their perspectives and increase the researchers’

truthfulness of a proposition about some social phenomenon (Denzin, 1978). Triangulation is defined as “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 126).

In this study triangulation of data sources was used to strengthen the confirmability and creditability of the research. It occurred through constant comparison of individual interviews that were conducted one-on-one with each of the seven participants. The interviews were also triangulated with the researcher’s field note entries. Field notes were taken to document each participant’s experience as a part of data collection during interviews, as well as for documenting excerpts from the conversations. The relevancy to the driving questions and emerging themes were also documented. Clearly written field notes for each interview are important for the researcher to read and re-read to assist in accurately reflecting the relevant facts of the stories such as time, setting and mood of the narrator.

The researcher also took measures to maximize the quality of the interviews. For example, to ensure that audiocassette tapes provided clear and complete recordings the equipment was tested prior to each interview. Interview questions were sent via E-mail to participants prior to the actual interviews in order to provide an opportunity to reflect on how they could best respond.

Member checks were conducted by providing transcripts of the interviews to the participants for review and comment. This measure ensured that the data was accurately recorded and that participants were provided sufficient opportunity to make clarifications and ask questions. Therefore, it enhanced the dependability of the data gathered for the narratives.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.301), both dependability and conformability can be determined through a “properly managed” audit. To establish dependability, various stages and techniques of the study were examined. To illustrate conformability, a record of the inquiry process, as well as all taped interviews, all data including documents, field notes, tapes, and transcriptions have been maintained and are securely locked in a cabinet. No follow-up interviews are anticipated, since the opportunity to review and comment on the transcriptions has been granted. Although the participants and the researcher have an agreement that should there be any questions, revisions, or additional comments, they are free to review the transcriptions. This agreement is an attempt to insure the data’s authenticity.

By providing rich, thick descriptions in the stories of the participants the readers can determine what is applicable to their own situations. In qualitative research, this is called transferability. This study also strives to achieve Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) criteria for writing good narratives that are “explanatory” and convey “adequacy and plausibility” (p.185). Limited amounts of literature exist relative to “rapport development” and issues of bias that arise from personal involvement in qualitative research; nevertheless, researchers must safeguard against emotional involvement when listening to narratives (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). The researcher must employ their own best standards of objectivity to assure trustworthiness of the data and ultimately the study itself. Narrative inquiry within the framework of empirical research has a tradition of revealing what Locke has called “signs of internal conceptions” (Gergen & Joseph, 1996, p. 4). We all possess sounds and intimate ways that we portray intended communication. Ultimately, it was this researcher’s ability and desire for competence that established meanings offered by the participants.

Phillion notes (Clanindin & Connelly, 2000, p.47), for the narrative inquirer, there is a possibility for the inadvertent potential to “autobiographically” bias the research with our personal interpretations based on cultural relativity, previous experience, or “personal tension.” Dewey states that as a group, we all are indeed influenced by our personal history. Therefore, we are “... prisoners caught in the framework of our theories . . . expectations . . . past experience; our language” (Clanindin & Connelly, 2000, p. 39).

The researcher reviewed key points with the participants and gave them the opportunity to add, delete or make any other modifications. Transcripts of each interview was provided to participants for review of accuracy and any necessary revisions.

Limitations of the Study

This study involves rich, thick descriptions of the individuals who experienced a crisis while attending a community college. A limitation is that this type of research depends on the memory of those telling their stories; therefore, inaccuracies can occur. Yet, through the overall stories, valuable insights are gleaned to understand their experience and inform those working in community colleges concerning their female African American students who may be in crisis. In this qualitative research design the researcher as the research instrument incorporates room for description of the researcher’s own biases and ideological preference. As described by Creswell (2007), it is the awareness of personal biases, values, and experiences the researcher may bring to the research, and the reflection of how these biases, values, and experiences may affect the research study. “The qualitative researcher early on identifies his or her biases and articulates the ideology or conceptual frame for the study.” “By identifying one’s biases, one can see easily where the questions that guide the study are crafted” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p. 212).

Qualitative research paradigm believes that the researcher is an important part of the process. The researcher cannot separate himself or herself from the topic, or the people, he or she is studying; however, it is in the interaction between the researcher and the researched that knowledge is created. Therefore, researcher bias enters the picture, even if the researcher tries to stay out of it. The researcher in this study made a conscious effort, for ensuring throughout this process, that the research actually revealed more about the subject than about the researcher.

Wolcott (1990) maintained that in the qualitative research process the researcher has to listen to the research subjects, because the most important aim is to capture each research subject's voice. He also pointed to the importance of beginning writing early, reporting fully, and writing fieldwork notes accurately. The researcher in this study, in order to prevent the research from being a narrative of her own opinions, remained candid, recorded detailed field notes, and was aware of her subjectivity. Wolcott (1990) claimed that qualitative researchers are always striving "to not get it all wrong" (p. 126), and bearing this in mind, would suggest that narrative research is trustworthy and reliable because of the extensive data generation procedures and the narrative research process.

Researcher as Research Instrument

According to Clandinin, (2007) the researcher asks questions about and looks for deeper understanding of particular aspects of life experience. Narrative inquiry emphasizes relationships or collaboration between the researcher and others (Pinnegar & Daynes, (2007). The researcher may check the emergent stories and negotiate their meanings with participants, Cresswell (2008).

The researcher is from a family of educators, however the researcher's own journey to the profession was complex. A superior student, she finished high school at age 16. At the same

time, however, she was pregnant with the first of her two children. For the next four years, all of her energy went into raising them. In 1977, she briefly enrolled in Truman College, but she dropped out when it became apparent that getting a degree was not an overnight process.

Seven years later, in 1983, with children in school, she re-enrolled in a community college. In 1985, she graduated on the Dean's List, with an Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education and went on to National-Louis University to receive a Bachelor's Degree in Human Development and Social Science in 1989. After taking some time off, she later returned to NLU and received a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Leadership and Advocacy in 1998. At both institutions, she managed to balance her education with being a full time worker and single mother. After receiving her Master's Degree in 1998, she returned to Truman College part time for the next three years as adjunct faculty in Early Childhood Education. While working as Associate Director at a social service agency for early childhood programs, she taught early childhood courses in the very classroom she received course work for her Associates Degree, and in 2001 was featured as a Truman College Success story.

Today she is a Deputy Director for Head Start Programs in the state of Alabama, and responsible for all areas of day-to-day program operations. The researcher is very proud that the program has a Partnership Agreement with community colleges for professional development of staff and encourages students and employees to trust their abilities, work hard and be patient. The researcher has a passion for community colleges because they were there and opened doors for her, encouraging her to ask questions and seek higher education.

Summary

This chapter described the study's qualitative research design, methodology, sample selection, instrumentation, data collection, and the data analysis procedures. It discussed why

the researcher determined that narrative inquiry was the best method to collect data concerning the myriad struggles of its participants. It told of the demographic group and how the participants were engaged, identified, qualified and processed into the study. Its target group was African American women who were community college graduates and who self-identified as being “in crisis” during their enrollment. The research method facilitated the expression of personal descriptors in the participants’ own voices, and enabled them to tell their stories about the determination it took to prevail over adversity and successfully face down personal crises and ultimately graduate earning an AA or AAS degree.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Chapter four of this research study presents and analyzes the data collection which was used to identify common themes from the descriptions of the women's personal experiences. The data sources for analysis included a demographic survey, interviews and field notes.

This study investigated how seven African American women persevered and overcame their self-identified crisis while attending one of the community colleges of Chicago. Not surprisingly, students attend community colleges to pursue a variety of educational objectives, including academic transfer. They persevered through their self-identified crises while attending community college and graduated. These women, different in many ways, provided a wide range of insights and perspectives to address the study's purpose. All seven of the participants completed their Associates Degree; however, two of the participants chose not to continue beyond community college. Three of the participants received a Bachelor's Degree and two continued on to receive a Master's Degree. The demographics and characteristics of the study participants allow the reader to better understand the context of their responses and insights (Table 1).

Table 1 *Demographics of the Seven African American Women Participants*

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>Children</u>	<u>Community College Degree Attained</u>	<u>Final Degree Attained</u>
Tina	30	Single	1	Associates Degree	Master's Degree
Ann	28	Divorced	2	Associates Degree	Master's Degree
Mary Ann	33	Married	3	Associates Degree	Bachelor's Degree

Shana	19	Single	1	Associates Degree	Associates Degree
Elizabeth	40	Divorced	4	Associates Degree	Associates Degree
Marie	39	Married	3	Associates Degree	Bachelor's Degree
Sophia	25	Divorced	3	Associates Degree	Bachelor's Degree

Data Gathered From Participant Interviews

It took four months to interview the participants. These were face-to-face semi-structured interviews employed to gather verbal data and observe non-verbal cues. In some cases, the researcher went back for a second interview in order to go beyond initial information and gather more in-depth information about the participants' experiences. These interviews were like a conversation, allowing time for the researcher to clarify information as well as enabling the development of a rapport so participants would feel comfortable telling their stories as these times were painful to remember. According to Creswell (2008), participants in a narrative study share their stories and feel important and comforted that their stories are heard. When the stories are well told there is a sense of connection between the listener and the teller. All names of the participants are pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Participant

Tina is a thirty year old single African American woman.

I grew up very poor and on welfare, in an impoverished community on the south side of Chicago. My mother had her first child at an early age and depended on welfare to care for my three older siblings and me. Two of my sisters became teenage mothers and I followed suit, having a child at the age of sixteen, continuing the cycle of poverty and welfare in my life. I graduated from high school ill prepared for college with several other obstacles facing me. I was a teenage mother with a one year old daughter, was on welfare, had no money for college, and no one in my immediate or extended family had ever even attended college. I knew nothing about financial aid or the college admissions process. All I knew was that I wanted to break the cycle of poverty and welfare in my

life and I knew I had to attend college in order to do so. At the time, community college was my only viable option.

The Crisis

During my first two years at the community college, my child's father went away to college. I had a series of deaths in my family, my father died, two aunts, one uncle, and a very close cousin. My daughter was also ill during the time I was in community college.

Family and Church Support

I would not have been able to make it without the support of my family, especially my mother and sister. They provided childcare and helped me financially. My church support and strong spiritual foundation gave me strength to endure during the crisis.

Faith

Although I experienced a series of crises, somehow through faith I knew if I persisted, "which I did", that I would be successful and graduate. It is easy to trust in God for the small things, but it is when you realize that God is there for the big things we can know we can hold onto our faith in times of trouble.

Community College Support

I attended community college during the day and worked in the English department, tutoring in the evening to help support my child. I tested at a college level for English, but struggled with Math and had to take remedial classes. Community Colleges, along with other programs, assisted me in ways I never thought possible. I received my Associates Degree with a 3.84 grade point average. I furthered my education by receiving a Bachelors of Arts in Psychology and a Masters of Social Work Degree from Chicago State University, all with the highest honors. I ended the cycle of poverty and welfare in my life that so many African American females face every day. All the obstacles that I encountered as a young African American single parent influenced my personal and academic development and helped me become the person I am today, a proud professional African American woman serving community college students, primarily minority students, many of which who come from similar circumstances as myself. Although the community college provided support in some ways, in other ways it lacked. Sometimes women experiencing crisis need a safe comfortable space to talk and share. Women in crisis often need to be connected to outside resources to assist them with their crisis, whether it is counseling for domestic violence, childcare, or other resources. I think community colleges can do a better job of connecting African American women in crisis to the community which have a wealth of resources.

Tina's story shows how higher education can break the cycle of poverty and welfare for low-income parents and their children. Open access to community college ensures that the

disadvantaged, especially women, have access to a college education. Through the process of successfully completing a degree and engaging in relevant pre-career internships and work study positions, low income parents and students like Tina develop crucial critical thinking and communication skills, giving them experience and credentials that enable them to become full and productive citizens, workers, and parents. Also, there are a variety of ways community colleges could be supportive to help students through the grief and mourning. Support from others is one of the most important ingredients for healing grief. A grief support group would be especially helpful.

Participant

Ann is a twenty-eight year old divorced African American woman.

I grew up in a two parent household with working parents. My dad was a barber and my mom was a lunchroom manager for the Chicago Public Schools. I am the oldest of two with a sister five years younger. As I was growing up, education was always important in our home. My parents were very hands on, helping with homework, attending PTA meetings etc. My grades were always good and my parents encouraged me toward college. However, at age 16, in my junior year of high school, I became pregnant with my daughter and after graduation rather than going away to college, I walked down the aisle and married my high school sweetheart and the father of my daughter. One year later my son was born and college seemed like a distant dream that had been lost and would be impossible to achieve. Here I was at age seventeen, still a child myself, married with two children. Ten years later the marriage ended and I decided I was going back to school. I had always known the importance of education and was determined to succeed and get a degree to be self-sufficient for myself and my two children. I took an apartment near my parents and enrolled in community college.

The Crisis

Shortly after enrolling in community college my father was diagnosed with lung cancer and died six months later. A year later I remarried and continued on with my course work. I was doing very well in my classes and had made the Dean's list with a 3.54 grade point average. The semester was about to end when I became a victim of domestic violence. I was badly beaten and had to tell my instructors of my condition because I was unable to attend classes.

Family and Church Support

My family, closest friends and church family rallied around me with the upmost love and support. They provided me with immediate and compassionate refuge and safety. Facing a wide range of issues, doctor's appointments, court appearances' and obtaining legal representation. I couldn't have made it through that difficult time without their support. I also received crisis intervention services from a domestic violence program that provided me with safety planning, court accompaniment and legal assistance that provided me with a divorce.

Faith

I grew up knowing that holding on to faith in times of trouble is to realize that when we trust God, "we know with God all things turn out to the good!" It may be hard for us to understand when we are in the midst of what seems to us as a mountain of total desperation, but it is then we need to remember, that it is with the "faith of a mustard seed" we can be sure God is in control.

Community College Support

The instructors were all very supportive and allowed me additional time to complete and mail in my final assignments. I had worked very hard and made the Dean's list and was very appreciative of the support and compassionate response I received from my instructors. It relieved me of the stress of having to worry about my classes in addition to everything else I was facing. I remained on the Dean's list and received my Associates Degree in Early Childhood Education and went on to receive a Bachelor's Degree in Human Development and a Master's Degree in Early Childhood. During the past century, community colleges have grown tremendously in number and have changed with the times. At community colleges, students can learn at any point in their lives while taking advantage of affordable tuition and convenient campus locations that offer open access. Many African American women today are reevaluating their lives and personal goals and embracing the knowledge that obtaining a college degree will result in an increased opportunity for success and obtaining life goals. African American women of all ages continue to make decisions to improve the quality of their lives by obtaining a degree. I'm not sure what else community colleges can do to assist, but I do know that it is important that students know that they can talk to instructors and if the instructor really hears what they have to say, or what they need at the time, that opens the door to a support system. Community Colleges opened doors of employment and knowledge for me, helping me to become the professional I am today.

Ann's story illustrates that most people are still unaware of the extent of domestic violence and its impact. Although progress has been made in tackling domestic violence and numbers of incidents have fallen over the past decade, young women are still at the highest risk of assault and abuse, as most victims tend to keep domestic violence to themselves. Although a victim of abuse, Ann had come from a place that taught her that education is important and equips you to make your dreams come true. She knew that an education would open doors of career opportunities that otherwise would not be open. Community college opened the doors and defined basic education, building confidence to face life and to accept successes and failures with a sense of pride and knowledge as she continued the learning process.

Participant

Mary Ann is a thirty-three year old married African American woman.

I was raised on the west side of Chicago in a Christian home, the third of five children; I have three brothers and one sister. My father was the head of our household and always provided for his family while my mother took care of the house and kids. We were active in our church and attended faithfully. We led a spirit filled life; we were not religious fanatics, just a wife, a husband, a parent, or in other words, very normal everyday people that felt the hand of God in our family many times. When I was a sophomore in high school I met my husband who is seven years older than me. My father was not on board with the relationship in the beginning, holding the position that this man is too old for you to date. Finally my parents gave their permission for us to date and with my parents' blessings we were married after I graduated from high school. My son, the first of my three children, was born a year later and the birth of my daughter soon followed, and ten years later my baby daughter arrived. Unlike my mother I did not want to continue to be a stay at home mom and decided to take a job in a child development center as a teacher's assistant. I love children and really enjoyed working with them; the teacher in the classroom was very good, had a passion for the job and did it well. After the first year I was inspired and made the decision to go back to school and maybe one day become a teacher as well.

The Crisis

During my two year tenure at community college I experienced living with a person on drugs. The sad thing about the situation is that person was my husband. I was married to

him for 15 years and discovered that he had been on drugs for about a year before I found out he was on drugs. Finding this out was overwhelming to me and having to cope with a drug addicted husband was emotionally draining. The drug abuse affected our finances and disrupted what had been a normal family life.

Family and Church Support

It was even more stressful because I did not share this information with my family. I was embarrassed and felt the need to hide the situation from my friends and my family. On more than one occasion I felt guilty, thinking I should have known and wondered what I could have done to prevent this from happening to my family. At church I covered and made excuses when asked about my husband's absence and did all that I could to present a normal existence for my children so they wouldn't feel threatened in the family environment. There was no family and church support for me.

Faith

What enabled me to persist at community college and reach my goal was God. I read the Bible each day. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." I was alone; there was no support for me. Although I felt isolated, I had known Christ all of my life and those beliefs and convictions in my faith in God kept me grounded. Our measure of faith increases and grows when we feed on the word of God and put it into practice.

Community College Support

The community college did not assist me. During the time, I wasn't aware of any type of service that could assist me with the issues I was experiencing. I feel that community college should have some type of support in terms of helping women with drug related issues or refer the women to an outreach program for women who are experiencing or living in a dysfunctional family. Yes, I would recommend attending community college. It's great for low income families seeking higher education; the classes are affordable and instructors understand about late assignments. I graduated with my Associates in Early Childhood Education where I received a solid based concept, learning the importance of developmentally appropriate practices in health and safety and play for young children. After receiving my Associates I went on to receive my Bachelors in Early Childhood as well. I am very happy in my position as a Master Pre-k teacher working with at risk children and families. These families are from a variety of cultures, ethnicities, and beliefs, but all families want to help their children succeed. My husband sought help through the church and went into a rehabilitation program and has been drug free for several years. There are no quick fixes for the decrease of drug abuse and alcoholism; recovery is an ongoing process. God understands our discomfort with crisis and stress, and we must find a way to keep the faith and push past the hurt toward love and encouragement.

MaryAnn's experience with her husband's drug abuse affected her family and created interpersonal problems with faith as her only support system. According to MaryAnn, among

the keys to a successful family life and support system are strong families who share a belief in something greater than themselves. We agree about what is right and wrong and what is really important. These shared values and keeping our faith give us purpose and help us to unite on goals.

According to the *Substance Abuse and Family Therapy Guide*, family therapy is a good resource for recovery for family members with drug and alcohol addictions. For recovery to begin family resources are needed to treat not only the abuser but other family members as well. Community college counselors are available to help students achieve their goals and to meet the needs of today's demographics; there may be a need for more than assistance in selecting courses or choosing a major. Sometimes it is important for personal counselors to discuss and explore confidential concerns that could include crisis, stress, or depression.

Participant

Shana is a nineteen year old mother of one son and lives with her parents.

I am an only child and live at home with my mother and stepfather who has always treated me like a daughter. My own father died when I was very young and he is really the only father I have ever known and has always provided well for my mother and me. We live in a very comfortable home on the south side of Chicago. My mother is a nurse and my father is a contractor who does home remodeling. Growing up my family and friends always said that I was a good girl but spoiled because my parents mostly gave me whatever I asked for. I went to all the games because I was on the cheerleading squad; and when we were not at a game we were at the mall shopping, going to movies, or at a party. My life was worry free. I did well in school and it was always expected that I would go to college. I had hoped to go away to a historically black college or university and go into the medical field like my mother, but the worry free life I had known was about to come to an end.

The Crisis

It was just after my sixteenth birthday and I had missed two periods after having spur-of-the-moment unprotected sex with my boyfriend of eighteen months. I had bought a pregnancy test that tested positive. All I could do was cry, saying to myself, "I'm only

sixteen what am I going to do?” Later I went to a nearby clinic to be tested where my fears were confirmed. I still remember the dreaded day when I had to tell my parents that I was about to have a child. My parents didn’t know what to say, and they didn’t talk to me for a couple of days. Things changed at school. When reality hit, friends didn’t talk to me as much and my boyfriend eventually strayed away and started to date another girl. Nobody wants to feel left out of things and it’s natural to want to be liked and feel as if you’re part of a group of friends. Unfortunately, it sometimes puts you in a position that makes you feel like you have to have sex to keep up or to be accepted. But deciding whether its right for you to have sex is one of the most important decisions you’ll ever have to make. Each person must use his or her own judgment and decide if it’s the right time and the right person. Sex isn’t just physical, it’s emotional too, and because everyone’s emotions are different it should be a personal decision based on your values and beliefs. It wasn’t until childbirth that I experienced the real pain that came with eighteen hours of labor, pain I wouldn’t wish on anyone. Then my son arrived weighing 7lbs. and 9ounces. My life had changed and now I’m a mother at sixteen.

Family and Church Support

Raising a baby can be very expensive. Paying for diapers, food, formula, clothes, and other child care necessities can be a strain on any paycheck. If it were not for the support of my mother and father and the rest of my family, along with a few friends who remained true, I don’t know how I would have made it through. I receive welfare to support myself and my son and childcare is paid for by Illinois Action for Children. I was fortunate enough to find an Early Head Start center for infants and toddlers near my house; the child development center in my community college starts at age three years so my baby was put on the waiting list. We live at home with my parents who offer much moral as well as financial support. Some of my friends say that I have it easy because of all the support that I have, but it’s not easy. Having a child is hard and I never thought of being a mother this young, with no help from the baby’s father. Before the baby, I was in church, but not consistently. After becoming pregnant I found myself in a somewhat depressed state, and the support of my church family meant a lot.

Faith

I love my son but there are times that I really wish that it never happened, like when my son is sick and cranky and I don’t know what’s wrong with him. He is crying, I am frustrated and all I want to do is cry with him. He wakes up during the night sometimes at 2 a.m. and again at 4 a.m. Sometimes he wouldn’t go back to sleep and would want to stay up and play. Recently he started to sleep through the night but still gets up every once and a while. The good part about being a teen parent is the way my baby looks at me with so much love in his eyes and when he does something for the first time, I’m excited and want to tell everyone I know. My faith is what gets me through to continue with my education because having a child can be especially hard when you are a student. I have to finish school and school doesn’t give you time to take care of the baby in the mornings, and when you are up at night all you want to do in the morning is sleep.

Community College Support

The professors and other staff that I got to know really helped me keep my head up when times got hard. However there are other staff at my community college that are really rude and come across very cold hearted. They should really take time to readjust their personalities. Some of the staff is also very incompetent; they have lost paper work and many other things have gone wrong. These are just a few things that could be worked on at my community college. I believe that any education, if it is a good education, empowers one. My community college education was fair. Some of the professors I feel don't work to their full ability, but overall, in its entirety, it was ok.

Shana's story illustrates that student parents face many challenges while pursuing higher education. Nearly fifty percent of student parents work full-time while enrolled, in addition to care giving responsibilities, which are heavier for enrolled mothers than their male counterparts. Single student parents are most likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds or situations, they are less likely to have parents who have earned postsecondary degrees and more likely to be low-income and qualify for need-based financial aid. Attempting to balance work, school, studying, and family demands, child care is an absolute necessity for most. Unfortunately, the need for child care is much greater than the supply of on-campus care. According to the Department of Education and a survey from the National Center for Education Statistics, only five percent of the child care needed by student parents is supplied at on-campus child care centers. Placement can require months or years on waiting lists, especially for infants and toddlers. Between 2003 and 2009, the number of two and four year institutions providing care has decreased with a large drop between 2007 and 2009 in the number of community colleges providing care. Community colleges have a much higher proportion of students who are parents than four-year institutions with only 13 percent of students being parents and six percent being single parents; at community colleges, 29 percent of students are parents and 14 percent are single parents (U.S. Department of Education 2009a).

On-campus child care centers provide student parents with peace of mind to focus on succeeding in classes while also providing high quality early childhood education and socialization for young children. Participants in a focus group of student parents attending community colleges identified stable child care, personal support from family members, peers, and college faculty and staff, and accommodating employers as leading factors influencing their ability to enroll in college (Matus-Grossman et al. 2002).

Participant

Elizabeth is a forty year old divorced mother of four.

I am divorced with four children; I have a 12 year old son, 13 year old twin girls, and a 16 year old daughter. After my twenty year marriage ended, I decided that I would go back to school and get a degree with the hope that I could better provide for myself and my children. I enrolled as a full time student in the community college near my home. Although most of the students in my classes were younger than me I felt very comfortable and enjoyed my classes. Because my children were not little children they understood what I was doing and help to make my transition as a student a smooth one. They were excited and happy because I was happy and, as a result, my first semester as a student was going very well.

The Crisis

Shortly into my second semester I received a call from my niece who lived out of state. It may as well have been a “bolt of lightning from the blue”; she had gotten into trouble and was incarcerated. This was something unexpected that suddenly hit our family and was a crisis that required the family to deal with many changes. She was the mother of four children: ages 8 months, 2 years, 4 years, and 6 years. She needed me to take the children and bring them back to Chicago to live with me; this was the only way to ensure keeping them together and out of the system. I wanted to do all I could to help transition the children and prepare for all the changes. It didn’t take long to realize that I would have to move my family and find a larger house or apartment large enough to accommodate us all. I also found myself back and forth to the Public Aid office trying to secure food stamps and medical benefits for the children. I was given a medical card for the children, but denied food stamps. Without this help it was difficult because my family had literally doubled in size. This was also a difficult time for the oldest child dealing with the trauma of being separated from his mom. When a family is experiencing a crisis, all its members are affected, including the children. He was having difficulties with the transition and acting out in school; this led to weekly counseling sessions to address his feelings of separation, anger, anxiety, and fear.

Family and Church Support

In order to continue to function as a family we (my children and I) had to adapt to change and accept the hardship. Being newly divorced and a single parent, I had to use my energy and resources to meet the challenge. I had to wipe away my tears and figure out my options for moving ahead. I focused on doing things together, planning fun time at home, playing together, and going to church together. My church family quickly became active assuming a family role helping with everything from childcare to making counseling appointments. I did not drive or have a car and was using public transportation to make counseling appointments and everything else that needed to be done. My church family quickly recognized that with the size of my family, having a vehicle would make life much easier for me and came together to teach me how to drive. After learning to drive, I was saving for a down payment on a car when the church congregation provided me with enough financial assistance to purchase a minivan.

Faith

As Christians we bring praise to Christ the King and we are thankful that God ordained the family to be a shelter for love and fulfillment so that none of us, his children, should be lonely. Faith and the support of my family and extended church family got us through; of this there is no doubt. Trusting in God and learning to be accepting of the help of others provided a strong network of support and opened doors of assistance from other community and family service organizations. “The family that prays together stays together.” This is my belief as a Christian.

Community College Support

With all of the love and family support I received, this was a draining process for me as a student not to mention being a single parent. I received much support from one instructor in particular, because I felt comfortable enough to talk about my problems. When I felt like giving up this instructor would always have encouraging words for me, and when needed, he allowed me a little extra time to get an assignment completed. Instructors are there for feedback in many ways. An instructor who really listens rather than just hears is invaluable to students and really helps a student to feel comfortable enough to relay their feelings and what they are going through. I appreciate all that my community college had to offer, and my encouraging instructor, however if there were support services for students in crisis I'm sure the resources provided would be appreciated.

Elizabeth's niece going to prison and leaving her children became her crisis. Elizabeth was left to cope with the stressors of a wide range of problems and various behaviors as the children went through the process of adjustment. According to Krisberg and Engel-Temin (2007), “African American children are nine times more likely to have an incarcerated parent than white

children. Latino children are three times more likely to have an imprisoned parent than white children” (p. 185). This discrepancy between ethnic groups has become more pronounced as the population of children with incarcerated parents has risen over the past decade (Krisberg & Engel-Temin, 2007).

Young & Smith (2000) found that children often experience better emotional outcomes in kinship care; however caregivers usually receive minimal services and funding from governmental and social agencies. As a result, limited financial resources may cause the quality of life for children in kinship care to decrease because caregivers tend to live in unsafe neighborhoods. Young & Smith (2002) indicate that kinship caregivers may face “emotional, physical, and financial difficulties when they take on the care of an incarcerated relative’s children” (p. 134).

Participant

Marie is thirty-nine years old and married with three children.

Growing up I did a lot of babysitting and loved spending time with children. My husband and I have two daughters ages eighteen and nineteen years old. They have both graduated from high school and gone away to college. My husband and I had been blessed over the years to buy a three bedroom home to live in and raise our daughters; but the house seemed empty when our girls went away. After a short while I talked to my husband about becoming foster parents. He thought it might be a good idea to help others so we investigated the requirements. My husband and I took preparation classes to become educated and informed as much as we could to be able to make good informed decisions each step of the way. The children in foster care have had many losses and much sadness in their young lives and it is important to have an understanding of this and have information on how to best integrate the new child into your family because you want to be able to make good informed decisions each step of the way. The first foster child placed in our home was a thirteen year old girl who had a history of running away from a home prevalent with drugs and domestic violence. The family caseworker assigned to us was responsible for placing the child with a family that was a “good fit for the child”. She was also a good fit for us and we worked well as a team making sure that we as a family had what we needed to move forward to best meet the needs of the child. My husband and I fell in love with this child and over time she grew to trust and love us. It wasn’t long before we started the adoption process; twelve months later she was ours and we had three daughters.

The Crisis

Shortly after the adoption was final I lost the job that I had worked on for fifteen years. This was a shock that I didn't see coming. After some thought I decided that I would enroll in community college and get my degree to better my career choices. All was well until I received a call that my daughter had an asthma attack and seizure at school and was rushed to the emergency room. This was just the beginning of many trips to the hospital. The teen years can be rough for kids, and even rougher for kids with asthma. The last thing they want is for their friends to see them as "different". In our case she was in denial about having asthma and stopped taking her medication, which lead to more symptoms and flare-ups. This meant that administering her medication had to be monitored until she could do it alone. It was important to keep her actively included in all discussions and decisions concerning asthma and the medication because ultimately she would have to take the medication regularly and deal with possible side effects. Through this crisis we experienced that uncontrolled asthma can lead to depression and low self-esteem, which manifested in emotional outbursts and poor school performance. This led to intervention with school counselors, teachers, and doctors. All of the doctor's appointments, meetings, and therapy sessions made my life as a student very hard.

Family and Church Support

I know God works through good doctors and I respect and I am thankful for the medical field and the ongoing collaborative intervention between counselors, social workers, and doctors, which was needed to combat the disease. If it weren't for the support of my family and my church family I don't know what my husband and I would have done. The church support was beyond measure with members from the men's group reaching out to my husband, the women's group reaching out to me, and the youth group reaching out to our daughter, offering support to us as individuals as well as a family. My church members pulled together and offered their support by letting me use their computers and were on standby whenever the school called about an attack to assist with trips to the hospital in hopes that I wouldn't have to miss classes. Because of their prayers and support I was able to finish my degree.

Faith

Our faith is what sustains us in times of trouble, but it really is a blessing when people of faith come to the forefront to help and to show support. Our youth group with the support of the Pastor, now actively participate in clean environment campaigns, as a matter of stewardship and advocacy efforts, because they see the human consequences of dirty energy with kids in the congregation suffering from asthma and parents battling cancer.

Community College Support

Now I'm unemployed with a sick child and trying to finish school, but as difficult as the situation was I must say that community college came to my aid. They worked with me to make up exams and allowed me to communicate via E-mail. The instructors were very

understanding. They took the time to work with me and walk me through assignments, when I needed extra help. I was allowed to make up assignments and come in on days when I was free or didn't have class, and I was also able to bring my child to school when I didn't have child care. The school was very understanding I was allowed to make up assignments and come in on days when I was free or didn't have class, and I was also able to bring my child to school when I didn't have child care. The assistance I received was very effective and aided me in continuing with no problem. But on the other hand, more job opportunity, more daycare opportunity, more on line classes for working individuals, and more grants to assist students for higher education would be a definite asset to community colleges. I learned how to deal with the circumstances and crisis presented by my child's illnesses and was determined to succeed. However, having more opportunities available during crisis, as support mechanisms, can become part of a process for facilitating other African American females who might be in crisis and need the same advocacy.

Marie's loss of employment motivated her to seek a new career while trying to recover from the personal impact of being fired from her position. She realized that the requirements for experience and specific types of education or knowledge required her to return to school. Taking classes at her community college afforded her open access; however facing the crisis of a sick child during her career transition could have very well prevented her success of achieving her goal. Marie realized that community colleges define the basic framework of education; and she realized getting her degree would equip her with what she needed to open doors of career opportunities, offering better prospects in career and growth. So, education becomes an eligibility criterion for employment into any sector of the industry.

Participant

Sophia is a twenty-five year old single mother of three.

I have been a single mom forever with two beautiful kids: twins, a son and daughter 8 years old, and a daughter 2 years old. Their fathers are not involved in their lives. When I graduated from high school I went to school and got my certificate to work as a dental assistant. After I finished the program I found a good job, got an apartment, and found out I was pregnant. The twins' father, my boyfriend from high school, moved out of state and has never met his children, and that is his loss. I was married briefly to an African whom I realized later just wanted to get his citizenship. It was an abusive situation. I was always being told that I was worthless and anything else negative that you can think of he said it to me. I spent a lot of time crying and depressed and always felt like crap. When the marriage was over my own twin sister and family members helped me through

it and I decided to return to school and pursue my educational career and get my degree in social work.

The Crisis

Shortly after enrolling in school I found out that I was expecting another child. Once again, I found myself feeling depressed, stressed out, and having no hope for a better future at the thought of being a single parent with three children and no financial support. My church, family, and friends offered support and I joined a support group for young mothers. This inspired me to keep going toward my mission of getting my degree.

Family and Church Support

I had the support of friends and family, but most of all my Godmother. She really did all she could to help out with childcare when I needed it. Finances . . . whatever she could do, she did to help me reach my goal, although family and church resources were a major resource for me. I joined a support group for young mothers at my church that inspired me and they also gave me the support and the help I needed to complete my mission. My Pastor and members of my church were concerned and they did not judge me. They prayed with me and me and my family.

Faith

My grandmother instilled in me that faith is not something that is passive. Our faith requires a commitment from us, and if thoughts of doubt come to mind we should counteract such negativity by counting our blessings and giving thanks for the abundance of good things we have. Keep positive affirmations of life and all God's Blessings and go by faith in times of trouble.

Community College Support

My Academic Advisor assisted in identifying resources so I could continue my studies and receive my BS degree. I recommend to people, men and especially African American women, who are experiencing crisis in their lives and want and need a change to do something for themselves, to go back to school and start at a community based college and don't stop, because the sky is the limit. I'm a living testimony that miracles can happen. My academic advisor continued to support me and assisted her in transferring to a four-year institution where I ultimately reached my goal and graduated.

Sophia's story is yet another example of how community colleges have seen a rise in the number of students who are older and single parents. These nontraditional students usually have significant family responsibilities, work commitments, and off campus obligations that can impede their academic progress (Durodoye et al, 2000). Counseling centers within the

community college setting were developed over forty years ago to effectively help students be successful in reaching their goals. This included academic advising, career guidance, and personal counseling (Coll, 1993). The change in student demographics has raised questions of whether the 1960s model meets the needs of today's students (Pascarella and Ternzini, 1998).

Presenting Themes from the Data

Interestingly, the general ideas of getting better jobs, being able to better provide for their families, gaining general knowledge, and enhancement of their self-esteem were the most mentioned reasons that motivated these women to attend college. However, what served as the underpinning to keep them enrolled and attending college were three themes: family support, their faith and college faculty support. Commonalities of emerging themes of family support were examined as the participants told their personal experiences. Family support included parents, grandparents, godparents, sisters, church members as extended family, and in some cases, those who had older children had their support as well. Themes emerged among all the women that faith, as well as family and church support was significant. Lastly, the support of community college faculty and advisory staff, who demonstrated patience and understanding in listening and flexibility with assignments, also come forward from these women as significant for the success toward goal attainment and receiving their community college degree.

Theme of Family Support

These women not only needed willpower, discipline, persistence, and family support, but they also needed to take positive action to show their faith through interaction with their church family. Every crisis is different, but they all share common traits. When a crisis strikes, for example, there is always tension between the desire to understand the nature of the emergency and the urgent need to take immediate action. There is no single rule book for managing crises, but their commonalities offer clear lessons on what matters to emerge successful and become empowered.

Theme of Faith

Among the keys to successfully reaching their goals with all these women were their spiritual values of faith and prayer. Strong families share a belief in something greater than themselves. They agree about what is right and wrong and what is really important to them.

These shared values gave these women purpose and helped them face their crisis and reach their goals. Spirituality is thus a powerful source of strength for these women, and their spiritual values provided them with direction.

The power of faith and belief with all of these women is real power. Believing that you can attain your goal is of great importance for its achievement. Without their faith, there would be doubts and disbelief, which could lead to non-doing and to non-achievement. Faith draws and attracts what you want into your life, whereas doubts, worries and disbelief push them away. Faith played a major role in their lives. They believed they could achieve their goals and had no doubts about it. They visualized their goals as already achieved, as already a fact. Faith in this sense equaled belief and certainty that they could achieve their goals. This kind of belief and faith strengthened the motivation to act and do things, and helped them to maintain the positive attitude necessary for success. Faith is important, but alone it is not enough for success.

Theme of Community College Faculty and Staff Support

Community college faculty and counselors had an emerging role as being effective in helping students to complete their academic objectives and reach their goals. They served as advocates showing empathy and flexibility with assignments. In addition to listening, they assisted and encouraged these nontraditional students, helping to successfully meet their needs and manage to come through their self-identified crisis and stay the course, and in most cases exceed beyond community college to a university.

Summary

In addition to determining the motivation of adult students when they enter community colleges, it is helpful to have a clear understanding of some factors that support the persistence and graduation of students. While these participants' experiences in no way provide a complete

overview of the challenges non-traditional students face, it does provide a clearer picture of the elements these participants feel foster and enhance their abilities to stay enrolled, to persist and to graduate from college. The study findings illustrate the importance students place on their family's support, the support of their faith and the support of college faculty and staff. This increased knowledge will allow community colleges to better meet the needs of these students to support and satisfy them.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

A century after the first community colleges opened their doors in 1901, the “people’s college” has become an extremely popular option for the growing numbers of Americans seeking higher education. Over the last two decades, the expansion of the community college sector has exceeded above all other sectors of higher education (Shugart, 2008). Within this growth, community college enrollment has become increasingly more diverse in terms of age and ethnicity. African American women represent a sizable segment of the community college population. For many African Americans, the community college milieu provides a more comfortable learning environment than a traditional four-year institution (Cohen, 2003). Easily accessible locations, affordable tuition, a wide array of courses and programs including technical, business, and nursing programs that equip students with knowledge and skills for careers in high demand fields, and flexible scheduling made even more so by a proliferation of online courses, are among the features that make community colleges an attractive option for African American women seeking upward social and economic advancement. Many are single parents driven by the desire to provide a better life for themselves and their families.

In conjunction with a wide variety of course offerings, community colleges also invest heavily in programs and strategies designed to provide their students with academic, psychosocial, financial, and career support (ACT, 2010a, 2010b; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Hagedorn, 2006; Jenkins, 2007). As the diversity of the student population increases, so does the complexity of adapting programs and services to meet the needs of the different groups of learners represented on campus. Sealey-Ruiz (2007) observes that, “Despite their struggle for higher education during the past century, black women have made amazing strides” (p. 45).

For many, that struggle involves overcoming a crisis, defined as an acutely stressful disruptive event that severely taxes the person's coping resources thus threatening the ability to cope or function effectively (Roberts, 2005).

This study explored how seven African American women persevered and overcame their self-identified crisis while attending one of the community colleges of Chicago. All seven women persevered through the crisis and went on to graduate from their respective programs. Several common themes arose from their stories, illuminating the resources and supports that enabled these women to overcome the challenges they confronted. The study also disclosed significant gaps in the services and supports that community colleges provide for their students. The insight and knowledge gained from this research study could be useful for helping community college officials expand and improve their services, not only by strategically targeting them to their students' needs but even more importantly, by building on the strengths that the students bring to the campus.

This chapter includes the following sections: (a) a brief summary of chapters one through four which provides a background for the research findings; (b) a summary of the findings followed by implications for practice organized under each research question; (c) conclusion; and (d) recommendations for future research.

Summary of Chapters 1 - 4

Chapter one served as an introduction to the issue being examined, including historical background on the evolution of the community college system and the progress and current situation of African American women in higher education. This chapter presented the statement of the problem, the purpose of this research study, the research questions driving the study, an overview of the research design, and the significance of this study to the community college

sector. Definitions of relevant terms were included to deepen understanding of the issue under study and the implications of the findings for future research and practice. Terms especially pertinent to this study were crisis, empowerment, faith, and resilience.

By presenting a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, chapter two provided a framework for understanding the study and its findings. The literature review began with an introduction to community colleges, the students they serve, the challenges they face in dealing with issues of student attrition and retention, and the need for programs to deal with these issues. This section was followed by more detailed exploration of community college student demographics; student support services and programs; influences on persistence; traditional age versus adult students; and first year seminars, orientation, and student success courses. A section on stress and coping led into discussions of counseling strategies for adult learners, culturally tailored interventions, students' perspectives, mechanisms for academic and social integration, and the experience of successful students. Academic advising, learning communities, culturally relevant learning, and mentoring were explored as proven or promising support strategies.

Chapter three presented a detailed description of the qualitative research design, including the methodology, sample selection, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis procedures. Narrative inquiry was selected as the most appropriate and fruitful method for identifying and elucidating the struggles of African American female community college graduates who reported being "in crisis" during their college career but nonetheless persevered to earn their degree. The participants were selected to represent Creswell's (2007) definition of a purposeful sample, specifically one consisting of individuals who can best articulate and illuminate the problem under study (p. 118). Seven women who attended one, or in the case of one participant, both of the Chicago community colleges over a period of eight years were

selected for the study. In addition to detailing the research methods, chapter three included discussion of ethical issues, including authenticity and trustworthiness which are particular concerns in qualitative research where the researcher is the research instrument. The potential for subjective bias in qualitative research was also discussed as one of the limitations of this study.

In chapter four the information drawn from the interviews was elaborated and analyzed. The seven participants ranged in age from 19 to 40. The theme of crisis was central to the research design. Common themes that arose from the interviews were: faith, family and church support, and community college support. The overarching commonality of the seven women was the display of resilience to overcome the crisis situation and persist in achieving their educational goals. All seven women successfully earned their Associate Degree. All but one subsequently transferred to a baccalaureate degree program. At the time of the interviews three had graduated with a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degree and three were still attending the university. Two of the three university graduates went on to earn a Master's degree, one in Social Work and one in Early Childhood.

The information gained from each participant was presented separately in order to provide a more vivid portrait of her unique experiences, perceptions, and perspectives. The stories were told in the participants' own words with the researcher's analysis following the participant's narrative. The women presented their stories in rich and articulate detail. Several participants offered specific recommendations for expanding and improving community college support services. The presentation of individual narratives was followed by discussion of the themes that emerged from the interviews, and finally by a detailed discussion of the theme of community college support.

Findings and Implications

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the in-depth nature of crisis in the experience of seven African American community college women and the strategies the women used to overcome the crisis and successfully persist to earn their Associate Degree.

Research Question One

What self-identified crises did the study participants face while attending community college?

For all seven participants, the crisis situation was an event, or series of events, that was unexpected and placed their educational aspirations in jeopardy. For two of the women, Tina and Ann, the crisis involved the deaths of family members compounded by an additional stressful event. As a teenage single mother who grew up on welfare in an impoverished Chicago neighborhood, Tina was determined to “break the cycle of poverty and welfare,” to use her own words; and community college was her only practical option. At the same time, her child’s father left Chicago to attend college and his departure was followed by a series of deaths in the family: her father, two aunts, an uncle, and a very close cousin. Exacerbating the situation, Tina’s baby daughter became ill during her time at community college.

Unlike Tina who grew up in poverty, Ann grew up with two working parents who actively supported her education and encouraged her to go on to college. Although Ann’s original plans for college were disrupted by teenage pregnancy, she married her daughter’s father and the couple had another son a year later. It was not until ten years later, when the marriage dissolved, that Ann decided to fulfill her educational aspirations. Divorce is often a key motivation for adult women who enter college (White, 2001). Similar to Tina, the first crisis

Ann experienced at college was the death of her father who was diagnosed with lung cancer shortly after she began community college and died six months later. A year later Ann remarried and earned excellent grades, even making the Dean's list. Her success was severely disrupted when she became a victim of domestic violence, with injuries that made her unable to attend class. Her diligent class attendance was interrupted by doctor's appointments, legal consultations, and court appearance.

Like Ann, Mary Ann was also married upon graduation from high school. After having three children over ten years, Mary Ann decided that she "did not want to continue to be a stay at home mom" like her own mother. However, her love of children was clear in her first job as a teacher's assistant at a child development center. After a year at the center, Mary Ann decided to pursue her own teaching aspirations. While she attended community college, Mary Ann found out that her husband of 15 years had been using drugs for the last year. His addiction affected the family finances and "disrupted what had been a normal family life." Given the long duration of their relationship, the revelation of her husband's drug use had to be a terrible shock, made even worse by the financial implications for her educational and professional future.

Shana, the youngest participant at 19, comes from a middle to upper middle class family, growing up with highly supportive parents and high educational and career aspirations. Her life changed dramatically when she became a teenage mother at 16. Shana is one of the many single parents attending community college.

Elizabeth, the oldest of the participants at 40, experienced the most unexpected and unusual crisis. In fact, the term she used to describe the event was a "bolt of lightning from the blue." The family abruptly found out that a niece with four children was being incarcerated and sending her children to live with Elizabeth, her only option for keeping the children together and

out of the foster care system. Elizabeth herself was a divorced mother of four children and suddenly found herself having to move to a larger home and navigate public agencies to secure benefits for the children, who were ultimately provided medical benefits but denied food stamps. In addition to managing a family that literally doubled in size overnight, Elizabeth had to help the older child, a six-year old, deal with the trauma of separation anxiety from his mother. It would be difficult to find a precedent for Elizabeth's crisis situation in the higher education literature. According to social science research, kinship caregivers are at risk for emotional, physical, and financial problems when they assume care for the children of a relative who is in prison (Young & Smith, 2000).

Job loss spurs many adult women to begin or return to college (White, 2001). For Marie, the loss of a job she had held for 15 years was not only sudden, but it came shortly after she and her husband formally adopted the 13-year old girl they had been fostering. The couple's two biological daughters were away at college and they decided to provide a caring home for a young adolescent with an unfortunate family history. The initial crisis of job loss was actually positive for Marie, who saw it as an opportunity to enroll in community college to expand her career options. However, her academic progress was disrupted by her daughter's asthma and made more severe by her daughter's denial of her condition which led her to stop taking her medication. The young girl's uncontrolled asthma had psychological and physical ramifications. As a result, Marie had to juggle her daughter's doctor's appointments, meetings, and therapy sessions with her academic work and other responsibilities.

Sophia was a single mother of twins and was divorced after a brief and emotionally abusive marriage when, with the support of her own twin sister and other relatives, she enrolled in community college with aspirations to earn a degree in social work. Soon after she began

college she found out she was expecting another child. In her words, “Once again, I found myself feeling depressed, stressed out, and having no hope for a better future” when confronted with the reality of having three children and no source of financial support.

Implications for Community Colleges

Each of the seven women are parents; several are, or had been, single parents and four of the women, ranging in age from 19 to 40, were caring for infants, preschool, or school age children at the time they attended community college. Recommendations for child care services routinely appear in the literature on community colleges but campuses have been slow to act upon them. Having access to onsite child care can be a pivotal factor in the educational futures of adult women (Johnson et al., 2000). Referrals for child care, along with referrals for other services such as tutoring, medical treatment, and long-term counseling were part of the counseling and support program created to help African American and Latina teachers’ aides earn bachelor’s degrees and credentials for teaching special education (Gary et al., 2004). Among the adult university students, surveyed by Bauman et al. (2004), forty percent expressed a need for financial assistance with child care.

For parents of school-age children, Marie’s experience dealing with her daughter’s asthma highlights the competing demands confronting community college students. Given the number of parents attending community colleges, support groups offer a viable mechanism for helping the parents on campus connect with one another. Beyond psychosocial support, support groups composed of parents of children of similar ages and grades could provide a venue for exchanging practical information and possibly helping out one another with appointments or other obligations that might keep them from classes.

According to NCES data, only five percent of the parents attending colleges and universities in the U.S. have access to onsite child care (USDOE, 2009a). Waiting lists are extremely long, especially for infants and toddlers. At community colleges, the proportions of parents and single parents are more than double the figures for four-year institutions: 29% versus 13% for parents, and 14% versus 6% for single parents. Paradoxically, the number of community colleges providing onsite child care actually declined from 2007 to 2009. It is widely recognized that many people enroll in community colleges to improve their earning capacity and better provide for their children. Neglecting the urgent need for child care services is a serious issue for community colleges and it undermines their mission to serve all students.

The crisis situations experienced by Tina and Ann who endured the deaths of their fathers and other loved ones while attending community college, Ann's experience with domestic violence, which Sophia had also endured before attending community college, Elizabeth's having to care for the children of an incarcerated relative, and Mary Ann's discovery of her husband's addiction illustrate the myriad of issues that women may be confronted with as they strive to attain their degree. Mary Ann reported that she was not aware of any services on campus that could help her deal with her problem. She recommends that community colleges offer some type of support services for helping women deal with drug related issues or provide referrals to an outreach program for women dealing with dysfunctional family issues. A grief support group would have been helpful for Tina and Ann.

While it may not be practical for a single campus to implement onsite programs dealing with the various problems students may experience, it should not be difficult to establish a referral system for connecting students with agencies that do provide assistance with drug issues, family problems, domestic violence, kinship care, and other issues. Broadly, students grappling

with any stressful life events could benefit from stress management programs. In fact, with elevated levels of stress endemic in college populations, Johnson et al. (2000) recommend incorporating stress management techniques into campus orientation. A major advantage of the program described by Gary et al. (2004) is that it included referrals for any services that were not offered on campus.

For several of the participants, the crises they experienced placed a strain on their financial resources. Community colleges educate a majority of low-income students pursuing higher education (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hagedorn, 2006). Students often obtain information on financial assistance, as well as other services, from informal social networks (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2008). The literature suggests that even when services are available, the formal mechanisms for keeping students informed are often inadequate. Nontraditional students need and desire financial advice and assistance tailored to their unique situation (Shugart, 2008; Baumann et al., 2004). The participants in this study, and indeed many students, are quite resourceful in seeking out needed resources but having to do this on their own only adds to their stress and further detracts from the time and energy they devote to their academic work.

Research Question Two

How were the study participants aided in their self-identified crises and how did this aid contribute to the students’ persistence in their academic program of study?

An overarching theme in the narratives of the participants was the help they received from their religious faith, and for several participants from their church. Each of the participants mentioned their faith as a critical factor in helping them persevere through the crises and fulfill their educational aspirations. Marie also spoke for several participants, declaring, “Our faith is

what sustains us in times of trouble, but it really is a blessing when people of faith come to the forefront to help and to show support.”

As specific examples, Marie described how the men’s group at the church reached out to her husband, the women’s group reached out to her, and the youth group reached out to their daughter, supporting them individually and as a family. In addition to spiritual and psychosocial support, the church members provided practical support by letting Marie use their computers and assisting with taking her daughter to the hospital so she would not have to miss classes. Elizabeth was helped by her church family with “everything from child care to making counseling appointments.” Even beyond that assistance, the church members helped her learn how to drive and provided her with financial assistance that enabled her to purchase a minivan.

In contrast to these extremely supportive experiences, Mary Ann was ashamed to tell her church family or her own family about her husband’s drug addiction. Instead, she made excuses for why he was not at church, which is a type of enabling behavior. For Mary Ann, who admittedly felt isolated from others, personal faith in God was a powerful resource that sustained and strengthened her commitment to her educational goals. Although Mary Ann’s story is a testament to her personal faith and resilience, it also underscores the need for campus resources to target drug related issues. Psycho-education or counseling to alleviate the perceived sense of stigma would certainly be beneficial.

For most of the participants, family members were an important source of support. The women described various emotional and practical ways their families helped them. For example, Tina elaborated how her mother and sister provided child care and financial support that enabled her to complete her degree. Much of the literature focuses on the problems experienced by first generation college students whose parents lack the cultural capital to help their children navigate

the college choice process and other related issues (Pascarella et al., 2004). Tina admitted, “I knew nothing about financial aid or the college admissions process.” However, a focus on practical knowledge ignores the fact that many parents who did not attend college have high educational aspirations for their children and eagerly support them in whatever ways they can. Tina’s mother and sister seemed determined to help her break free of the cycle of poverty that limited their own lives.

Family, close friends, and church members helped Ann deal with the psychological and practical impact of domestic violence, and family support was essential to the perseverance and success of Shana, Elizabeth, Marie, Sophia, and Marie. A common theme in the portrayals of family support was that support came from extended family members. This finding corresponds to other research reporting that African American women on campus often draw social support from extended families (Bradley & Sanders, 2003; Sealey-Ruiz, 2007).

Unfortunately, there was less evidence that the participants obtained sufficient support from their community colleges. On the whole, the support they experienced came from individual faculty and staff members. Ann and Marie both had highly supportive instructors who allowed them additional time and made other accommodations. According to Ann, their support and compassion allayed the stress of having to worry about her classes and this inspired her to work hard, remain on the Dean’s list and earn her degree. Ann now has a Master’s degree in Early Childhood. Ann believes that having instructors who are accessible, easy to talk to, and even more important, are active listeners, is important for the success of community college students. Elizabeth expressed similar beliefs, also emphasizing the importance of “an instructor who really listens rather than just hears.”

Shana also related how certain professors and other community college staff “really helped me keep my head up when times got hard.” Their support and the support of her family were especially vital because Shana lost some of her friends when she became a teenage mother. Elizabeth elaborated on the support and encouragement she received from one instructor in particular, with whom she felt sufficiently comfortable to discuss her problems. Sophia credits her academic advisor with helping her secure needed resources and supporting her through the transfer process to a university where she earned a baccalaureate degree.

On the negative side, Mary Ann found no support for her problem on campus. Shana encountered rude and indifferent and even incompetent staff members along with those who were supportive and helpful, and Tina described the services on campus as adequate in some respects and deficient in others. What was lacking in the participants’ narrative was evidence of a cohesive support system for serving the needs of the community college students.

Implications for Community Colleges

The absence of an infrastructure for providing community college students with services and supports has definite implications for community college administrators and staff. Tina now has a Master’s degree in Social Work, thus allowing her to help others break the cycle of poverty like she herself did. In some ways, her perspective can be seen as analogous to Hagedorn (2006) in that both see the challenges facing community college students from the dual perspective of student and expert. Tina feels the community college provided support in some ways but not in others. In particular, she emphasizes the need for community partnerships by which community colleges connect African American women in crisis with community resources.

According to Goodman and Pascarella (2006), the positive advantages students gain from attending first year seminars may come from the opportunities they provide for students to

engage in informal discussions with faculty members. The support of individual faculty members was a prominent theme in the narratives of the participants. Strategies such as first year seminars and learning communities that facilitate interactions between students and faculty as well as among students have proven extremely helpful in helping community college students build and sustain supportive relationships (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Sophia specifically cited the help she received from her academic advisor. The individualized advising program described by McArthur (2005) resulted in high ratings of their advisors by the A&H students as well as substantially higher retention rates for the program. Based on the comments of the participants in this study, the ideal academic advisor is one with whom students feel comfortable and feel they can talk to, and above all else, is someone who really listens to what they are saying and conveys the impression that he or she really cares. Sophia also described her advisor as very knowledgeable, which is what the A&H students desired from their advisors after their experience with advisors who were uninformed and gave them poor advice. For women struggling through a crisis, caring, compassionate attitude and good interpersonal skills with emphasis on active listening are even more important than concrete knowledge that can be acquired through training.

An extremely important implication for community colleges drawn from this study is the need to respect, appreciate, and build upon the resources that African American women bring with them to the community college campus. In the case of the seven participants in this study, personal faith and church and family support were pivotal factors in their success. Programs that build upon these resources such as partnerships with faith-based community organizations and campus events that include family members could be especially valuable for students going through crisis situations. African American women who have succeeded in community college

generally have strong inner resources and rich social support networks (Barbatis, 2008, 2010; Johnson, 2001).

Research Question Three

How can community colleges better assist African American female students in crisis to persist and achieve their educational goals?

The stories of the participants revealed strengths and deficiencies in the resources available to African American women in crisis. Tina observed, “Women in crisis need a safe comfortable space to talk and share.” Women in crisis often need to be connected to outside resources to assist them with their crisis, whether it is counseling for domestic violence, child care, or other resources. Tina added that she felt “community colleges can do a better job of connecting African American women in crisis to the community which has a wealth of resources.”

Perhaps illustrating Tina’s expertise as a social work professional, she astutely targeted what is needed for helping African American women in crisis and the vast potential of partnerships with community organizations. In critiquing the applicability of conventional models of student persistence to community college students, Hagedorn (2006) argues that unlike traditional students who enter college immediately upon graduation from college, often leaving home for a residential institution, community college students do not abandon their lives before college. Rather, college becomes one more aspect of their typically busy lives. Most of the literature emphasizes the challenges faced by community colleges striving to balance competing responsibilities. Far less attention is paid to the family and community support that enables many community college students, like the women in this study, to persevere and earn their degree.

The participants are virtually unanimous in endorsing community colleges as an excellent way for individuals with limited financial resources to pursue higher education. Even Mary Ann who found no resources on campus for helping her deal with her husband's drug abuse problem praised the educational foundation she received. Mary Ann went on to earn a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood and is now a Master Pre-K teacher working with at-risk children and families. Her husband went into rehabilitation and has been sober for many years. Yet despite the positive outcomes, Mary Ann's experience clearly reveals major gaps in the services offered by the community college.

At the individual level, caring and supportive faculty members are an invaluable resource for African American women striving to overcome crisis situations. In addition to providing the women with social and emotional support through their caring and compassionate attitudes, a theme that repeatedly surfaced in their narratives was how the instructors allowed them extra time with their work, offered them opportunities to make up work they missed, and made other accommodations to facilitate their academic success. For Shana who was clearly struggling with the social and emotional implications as well as the practical challenges of being a teen mother, compassionate and supportive faculty members helped restore self-esteem and self-confidence. Informal interactions with faculty members are important for all students and may be even more important for first generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004). For African American women in crisis, such interactions may be essential.

Implications for Community Colleges

The overarching implication for community colleges is that there is no evidence of an infrastructure for services designed to support students in crisis. Indeed, the term "crisis" in the community college literature typically seems to be construed as an academic crisis.

Community colleges provide a plethora of programs, services, and supports for students who experience academic difficulties (Habley & McClanahan, 2004). Indeed, this emphasis is not unwarranted in view of the high proportion of students who begin community college academically underprepared. However, the needs of community college students are far more complex. Furthermore, the student population is far too diverse for any single solution to be effective (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hagedorn, 2006).

The *sista* counseling intervention for African American female college students described by Bradley and Sanders (2003) could be a viable strategy for helping young African American women. Building on the strong social support networks that often provide an essential resource for promoting resilience in the face of adversity, the client's (the community college student's) close friends and relatives use their personal insight to assist the counselor as well as providing the client with active support. There are three key issues that are requisite for this type of intervention. First, the client (the student) has a support group of friends who are concerned about her welfare. Second, the client (the student) must be receptive to the idea of having her sister friends come to the counseling session. Third, the client (the student) and her support group must be advised about confidentiality before the meeting.

Bradley and Saunders (2003) note that group counseling and support groups have been lauded as the optimum form of counseling for African American female students. They also note, however, that individual counseling has been given far more attention on college campuses than group counseling. The neglect of group counseling is actually ironic in view of the capacity of group sessions for serving more students and for informally facilitating the development of social networks and friendships among the participants.

Learning communities build on the sense of community shared by many African American women and promote self-expression, self-reflection, and collaborative learning (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; James et al., 2008). Information networks may be critical to the survival of many community college students (Karp and Hughes, 2008). Often these networks grow out of student success courses. Although neither learning communities nor student success classes are specifically designed to help students in crisis, the social and academic support they offer can be an important resource for students undergoing a personal crisis. In particular, the social networks they generate offer students needed support and encouragement from professors and peers.

The counseling program described by Gary et al. (2004) offers a model for counseling interventions for African American women. Notably, the program, built on the participants' natural support networks and the faculty counselors, supplied them with information on all the available resources and encouraged their involvement with formal and informal supports. As a result of the program, the participants had access to services ranging from academic assistance to stress management to child care. The most effective programs for nontraditional students are created with input from the students themselves and therefore tailored to their unique needs and preferences.

The most viable option for helping students through a wide range of crisis situations is following Tina's advice and establishing collaborative partnerships with community organizations. This strategy has the capacity to maximize resources while minimizing the costs to the community college. An added advantage to the students is that they may feel more comfortable working with local organizations. The seven participants in this study successfully

secured the resources they needed although in most cases with minimal support from the community college.

Conclusion

The narratives of the seven African American community college graduates interviewed for this study portray an extremely resilient group of women determined to achieve their educational goals despite having to work through crisis. Strong religious faith was a powerful inner resource that enabled them to surmount the obstacles they encountered. In addition, the women had faith in themselves and their own ability to succeed though it was clear at times they had to struggle to maintain their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Family and church support also emerged as essential elements in their journey. Family and church family members provided both practical and psychosocial support. For several of the women, close friends were also integral to their informal support network. In effect, the seven women had a powerful combination of internal and external resources that worked to sustain and reinforce their determination in the midst of crisis. Although two of the participants were married, there was no indication of support from their spouses.

The support the women received from their community colleges was much more limited. At the individual level, there were many references to caring, compassionate, and supportive faculty members with whom the women could freely talk and who listened attentively and made time and other accommodations. However, the narratives also disclosed an urgent need for support services for students who experience crises outside the typical realm of academic difficulties. The establishment of a system for partnerships with community agencies and a referral system for students would be excellent for helping African American women in crisis persist in attaining their educational goals. Ideally, this system would build on inner and external

resources the women bring with them to the campus. The Bates Model for community colleges establishes a counseling / crisis intervention center which can be valuable not only for African American female students but potentially all students.

The Bates Model for the Initial Creation of a Community College Counseling / Crisis Intervention Center

Due to the difference in cultural background, family background, education experience, growth stage and experience etc., crises are not experienced by everyone. The findings of this research suggest the crisis of community college students differ from one another with each one having its individual particularity. Today, many community colleges are grappling with the question of how to assist these students. The Bates Model provides the initial steps for community college leaders to follow as they seek to establish a counseling / crisis intervention center within community colleges to assist students who are facing personal problems, feeling emotionally distressed, or experiencing a crisis situation. This model can be used for both academic and student affairs. In light of the unique needs and culture of community colleges, this initiative is intended to improve community college's ability to effectively respond to students in crisis. Students facing crisis or facing challenges deserve the opportunity to get ahead and reach their educational goals.

The Four Steps of the Bates Model

Step One: Evaluation of Student Needs

In order for community colleges to provide services that are useful for their students, initial information must be gathered to understand the types of services students might need. This can and should be done in a variety of ways in order to gather information regarding the types of problems or difficulties students are finding prevalent in their lives while attending

college. Student focus groups can be held during each semester (fall, spring, and summer) to gather pertinent data. In addition, a simple student survey (Appendix C), can be developed and taken by a cross section of the student body. This student survey, for example, can capture information at multiple periods (beginning, mid-term and final days) during the semester to assess students' stress and their needs for specific services. The survey can be administered in an online format, such as *Survey Monkey* for student convenience and ease of analysis relative to the data gathered. Results from various data activities guide the development, implementation, and evaluation of the college's Crisis/Intervention Center.

Step Two: Appropriate Staff

The crisis intervention team should consist of a Center Coordinator, Crisis Team Leader, Crisis Counselors, and Licensed Social Workers (LSW) who would deal with student problems. List of staff and their general responsibilities is found in Table 2. Staff can be hired in increments as the need for service grows.

As a part of provision of personal counseling, the crisis center will assist students in emotional distress and provide an intervention plan for each student. Professionally trained counselors will be available to support and empower students to accomplish their career and personal objectives through a variety of programs and services, including but not limited to individual and group counseling. These counselors will have a case load, offer in-house counseling services, and refer students to the appropriate community resource. Staff will undertake and view services with a student centered approach in order to better align services that will address the issues of those they are designed to help support.

Table 2 *List of Center Team Roles and Responsibilities*

Position	Responsibility
Center Coordinator	Responsible for overall management of center and staff. Verifies student facts for referral to appropriate services. Contacts crisis intervention counselors. Maintains written/oral communication with faculty and students. Maintains coordination with community service resources and agencies. Makes notifications as required.
Crisis Team Leader	Convenes crisis team and assigns roles and responsibilities Compiles list of students presenting at the center. Addresses follow-up issues with students. Organizes and convenes morning and afternoon meetings Documents information for the Center Coordinator, faculty and students
Crisis Counselors (Counselors and Social Workers)	Provides counseling and intervention services. Addresses follow-up issues with students. Provide referrals for students to community resources and agencies.

Administrators, faculty and staff who are interacting with students are in an excellent position to recognize and observe behavior changes of a student that maybe stressed or in crisis. Acknowledging concerns directly to the student staff can serve as a significant factor in making a referral and successfully solving the problem. Faculty and staff can confer with the Center Coordinator when making referrals as well as communicate with the student to ensure that the student successfully follows through.

Step Three: Selecting Services to Provide

In order to offer the most suitable services and referrals, a student's needs assessment must be conducted at the college. Since each community college is unique, the needs of its students will be unique. Therefore, a variety of techniques to gather this information should be done prior to the Center's opening as well as periodically. This could include such techniques as

surveys (paper and web-based) as well as focus groups. Once this information is obtained, the offerings of the center can be developed.

The center will advocate for and encourage the social, emotional and academic growth of all students. Students can see a counselor for confidential, short-term counseling.

Appropriate referrals will be made to additional resources, both on and off campus, to address specific student issues. Challenges of the crisis center practices include a stronger emphasis on instructional intervention, progress monitoring, and data gathering in relation to social work and counselor interventions that tend to be less directly academic and more mental health focused. Most direct services will be rendered through community organizations in order to assist the community college in providing more services in an environment where resources and funds are scarce.

Each college needs to decide how to fund the crisis center. One way to acquire funding is through receipt of grants or through charging students a nominal fee-for-services on a sliding scale. Another avenue for continual funding is through the assessment of a small student fee charged each semester. However the center is funded, it is hoped these services might be free to those who need them.

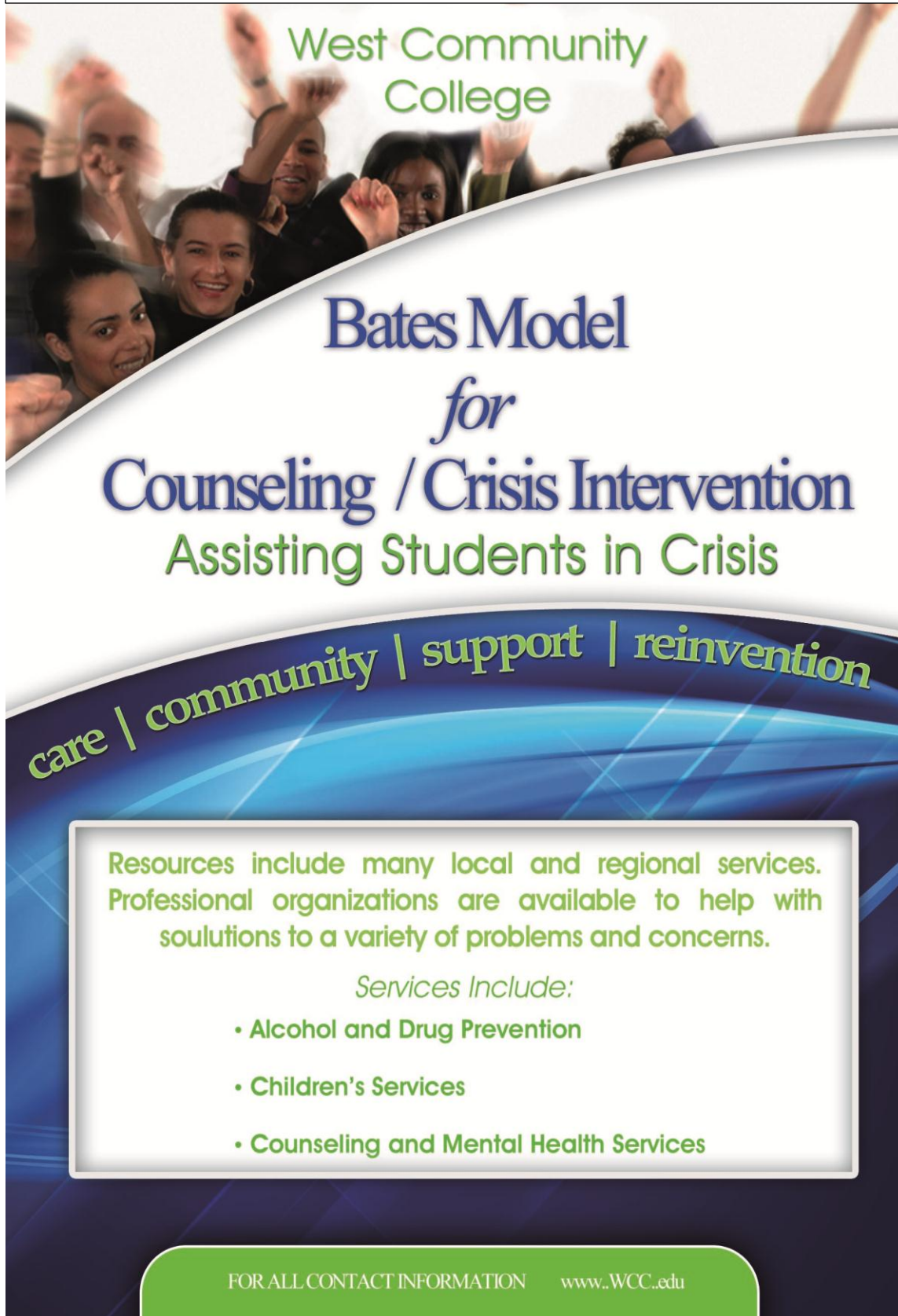
Step Four: Continuous Assessment of Services and “Fine-Tuning” of the Center

The Crisis Center Team will annually conduct relevant comprehensive assessments services provided. It is important for center staff to continuously review and document both the services and the outcome of the services provided. Therefore, timely and accurate quantitative and qualitative data must be routinely collected and analyzed. Continuous quality improvement efforts will only strengthen the center, making it more useful to those needing services.

Promoting Services of the Crisis Center

It is important that student, faculty, and staff know the crisis center is available to provide needed services and referrals. Communication introducing the services offered and dissemination of pertinent information must be readily available to all. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Figure XX represents a flyer that might be distributed at the college to inform students, faculty, and staff of the crisis center.

Figure XX: Crisis Center Flyer



West Community
College

Bates Model
for
Counseling / Crisis Intervention
Assisting Students in Crisis

care | community | support | reinvention

Resources include many local and regional services. Professional organizations are available to help with solutions to a variety of problems and concerns.

Services Include:

- Alcohol and Drug Prevention
- Children's Services
- Counseling and Mental Health Services

FOR ALL CONTACT INFORMATION www.WCC.edu

Recommendations for Future Research

The information gained from this study could be combined with other qualitative resource findings to develop a survey instrument for further examining the factors involved in African American community college women's ability to work through crises and successfully graduate. An instrument of that type could also be used to compare the responses of women who did and did not persevere to earn their degree. Insight into the attributes distinguishing the two groups could be useful for targeting interventions.

Although the seven women expressed recommendations for improving campus services for African American women in crisis, that was not a focal point of the study. Eliciting the opinions of individuals who are likely to be clients of campus services is especially important for developing support services for nontraditional students (Bauman et al., 2004; Gary et al., 2004). Surveying both traditional and nontraditional age African American community college women on the services they would like to see on campus is a topic for future research.

This study involved women who attended two Chicago community colleges. Another research endeavor, to undertake in the future, would be surveying a large, national sample of community college officials to explore the types of services and supports they offer for helping students through crisis situations. Research of that type might reveal model programs that could be adapted to fit the needs of African American community college women as well as provide insights into the effectiveness of various programs and strategies.

Continued research is important to assist women in crises who want to make a difference in their lives by attending community college, by seeking higher education, and by succeeding in spite of their crisis. It has been shown that the influence of educated mothers and wives has

encouraged others, the next generation of minority men and women, to get an education and to reach their potential by striving for their dreams.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. When did you graduate from community college?
2. What was your major?
3. What crisis or crises did you experience while attending community college?
4. While in crisis, what enabled you to persist at community college and reach your educational goals?
5. Did you have support in persisting throughout the crisis?
6. Did the community college assist you? If so, what type of assistance did you receive?
7. If you received assistance from the community college, was that assistance effective? Please explain.
8. In which ways could community college improve services to support and assist African American female students in crisis?
9. What barriers to persistence can be assuaged by both community colleges and the community at large in order to sustain African American female students confronted by crisis and struggling to achieve their educational goals?
10. Do you think that your community college education empowered you? Please explain.
11. Did you continue to further your education after graduating from the community college? Please explain your decision.
12. Would you recommend that others attend community college? Please explain

APPENDIX B
Informed Consent – Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study that will take place from June 2008 until April, 2009. This form outlines the purpose of this study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

I consent to participate in a research project conducted by Marcie Bates, a doctoral student at National –Louis University in Chicago, Illinois.

I understand that this study is entitled From Crisis to Empowerment: African American Women in Community College. The purpose of this study is to examine the persistence and goal achievement of African American females who self-identify as being in crisis while attending community college and ultimately reach their academic goals and graduate.

I understand that my participation will consist of one interview lasting 1-2 hours, with a possible second, follow-up interview lasting 1 hour. I understand that I will receive a copy of my transcribed interview at which time I may clarify information.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and there are no anticipated risks or benefits to me associated with this research any greater than those encountered in daily life. Further, I understand the information collected from this research could be of benefit to future African-American women “in crisis” seeking a community college degree.

I understand that I can withdraw at any time without prejudice until completion of the dissertation.

I understand that only the researcher, Marcie Bates, will have access to a secured file cabinet in which all transcripts, tape recordings and field notes will be kept.

I understand that the results of this study may be published or otherwise reported to scientific bodies, but my identity will in no way be revealed.

I understand that in the event I have questions or require additional information, I may contact the researcher: **Marcie Bates, 7351 S. Sacramento Ave. Chicago IL. 60629 (312) 608-7067 or mbates56@yahoo.com**

I have been informed that if I have any questions or concerns before or during participation that I feel have not been addressed by the researcher, I may contact the Primary Advisor and Dissertation Chair: **Dr. Rebecca Lake, National-Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, IL 60603, (312) 261-3534 or Rebecca. Lake@nl.edu**

Participant’s Signature _____ Date _____

Researcher’s Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX C
Demographics Questionnaire

Part I & Part II

Student ID Designation _____

Thank you for your participation in this survey of the impacts of personal counseling on stress, academic success, and retention in community college students. Please fill out this questionnaire honestly, as your identity will be kept confidential. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the counseling center.

PART I:

PLEASE ANSWER THE QUESTIONS BELOW

1. Please state your date of birth: _____ (ex. 12/12/1983)
2. Where were you born?
 - a. If not in the United States, how long have you lived in this country?
3. What is your ethnicity?
4. Please state your gender.
5. Please state the number of credit hours you are currently enrolled in.
6. Please state the number of credit hours you plan to enroll in the following semester.
7. Are you working in addition to attending classes?
 - a. If yes, how many hours per week?
8. Please circle your household income.

\$0 - \$25,000	\$25,000 - \$50,000	\$50,000 or MORE
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9. What is your current cumulative grade point average (GPA)

10. Please state any comments you would like to express if any, in this questionnaire.

Thank you again for your participation in this survey of the impacts of personal counseling on stress, academic success, and retention in community college students. The questions in this scale ask you about your feelings and thoughts during the last month. In each case, please indicate with a check how often you felt or thought a certain way.

Demographics Questionnaire

Student ID# _____

PART II:

PLEASE ANSWER THE QUESTIONS BELOW WITH A CHECK MARK

- 1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?**

___0 = never ___1 = almost never ___2 = sometimes ___3 = fairly often ___4 = very often

- 2. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?**

___0 = never ___1 = almost never ___2 = sometimes ___3 = fairly often ___4 = very often

- 3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and ‘stressed’?”?**

___0 = never ___1 = almost never ___2 = sometimes ___3 = fairly often ___4 = very often

- 4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?**

___0 = never ___1 = almost never ___2 = sometimes ___3 = fairly often ___4 = very often

- 5. In the last month, how often have you felt that things were going your way?**

___0 = never ___1 = almost never ___2 = sometimes ___3 = fairly often ___4 = very often

- 6. In the last month, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?**

___0 = never ___1 = almost never ___2 = sometimes ___3 = fairly often ___4 = very often

- 7. In the last month, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?**

___0 = never ___1 = almost never ___2 = sometimes ___3 = fairly often ___4 = very often

- 8. In the last month, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?**

___0 = never ___1 = almost never ___2 = sometimes ___3 = fairly often ___4 = very often

- 9. In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?**

___0 = never ___1 = almost never ___2 = sometimes ___3 = fairly often ___4 = very often

10. In the last month, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?

___0 = never ___1 = almost never ___2 = sometimes ___3 = fairly often ___4 = very often

Cohen & Williamson (1988)