

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON UNDERSERVED STUDENTS

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by

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ABSTRACT

Persistence and retention continue to be educational concerns among colleges and universities. Students are labeled “at-risk” based on various factors such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, and traditional/non-traditional status. Due to “at-risk” students, referred to as underserved students in this study, not always receiving the proper support and resources needed to survive in college; many “at-risk” students leave college.

This Dissertation in Practice (DiP) includes three manuscripts developed by a three-member research team. This study specifically focused on the following underserved student populations: first-generation college students and African American students. Each author carried out separate research studies by exploring an engagement strategy and its effect on student success. The first manuscript lead authored by Emily Tucker, Chapter 2: Exploration of a Minority Male Support Program as a Method to Improve Academic Success, encompassed a quantitative study of a support program for African American males and whether providing this program is successful in improving student success. This study utilized data provided from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). The second manuscript lead authored by Tonyalle Rush, Chapter 3: The Perceptions and Experiences of First-Generation College Students at a Commuter Campus at a Two-Year Institution, encompassed a qualitative study of students’ perceptions of engagement with faculty and support staff (if any occurred) and whether the engagement had a positive or negative impact on their collegiate experience. Fifteen first-generation college student interviews were utilized for data purposes. The third manuscript

lead authored by Mark McCloud, Chapter 4: The African-American Internship Experience, encompassed a qualitative study of African-American students who participated in internships and whether their internship experiences had an impact on their educational progress. Ten students who participated in internships were utilized for data purposes.

All three research studies found benefit from the engagement of underserved students which improved academic success. Students reported that faculty/staff, peer support, and a supportive campus environment were valuable to the success of first-generation and African American students. At the conclusion of the study, the authors provided several recommendations for practitioners to use.

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To God be all the glory for the things that He has done. I am grateful to God for the opportunity to pursue the doctorate of education degree and the many doors He opened throughout this process. I thought completing a doctorate degree would be almost impossible, but with God all things are possible. I believe...

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COLLABORATIVE INTRODUCTION

COLLABORATIVE INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of a post-secondary education is one of the most desired goals among young adults. Graduating from high school and earning a high school diploma used to be a major milestone; now, however, one is automatically expected to go to college and graduate with a degree. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found in 2010 that an estimated 13.7 million students enrolled in degree granting post-secondary institutions. Enrollment is projected to increase to 20.6 million in 2021 (Bonet & Walters, 2016).

The importance of education has been instilled in Americans for many years. Colleges and universities provide avenues for students to obtain credentials as they progress to graduation and eventually obtain gainful employment. Not only do college graduates enjoy greater income, but they generally have better health, are usually promoted at a higher rate, have children who are better achievers academically, and generally experience an overall better quality of life (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013).

Although great strides have been made in regards to accessibility and affordability for college students, important challenges remain and opportunities exist to address issues with accountability and attrition. More students are enrolling in postsecondary institutions due to an increase in financial aid opportunities, a rise in more post-secondary college choices, and open-admission standards at some institutions. With the influx of more college enrollees, institutional responsibility to be accountable for student learning and student development is intensified. Although student learning and degree completion is expected, student attrition

abounds and donors, tax-payers, government officials, parents, and students are all pointing the finger at institutions and their lack of accountability.

Retention has been a cause for major concern at institutions of higher learning for many years. Many students enroll at a higher education institution, select a major, attend class, and ultimately never complete a degree. Vincent Tinto (2012) has studied student attrition for over 40 years. Institutions, private entities, and government agencies have been supporting programs focusing on improved student retention for over 25 years. Tinto (2012) suggests that in reference to improving the retention and success of students, the weight of efforts be placed on institutions and their academic and social atmosphere, and not merely on students, themselves. He specifically points to the classroom as the object of retention improvement endeavors, as most students spend time learning and interacting in the classroom, whether they are traditional or nontraditional students (Tinto, 2012).

With the dropout rate at nearly 40% and with almost one-third of students dropping out during their first year, attrition is a major concern for educational administrators (Hout, 2012). This unappealing trend of low retention and persistence rates is more evident for some student populations than others. Green (2006) states that underserved students find difficulty in accessing college, transitioning from high school to college and succeeding in college. She defines underserved students as first-generation students, students of color and students from low income backgrounds (Green, 2006). It is the authors' mutual desire to determine the value of student engagement and examine the persistence and retention rates of African American and first-generation students. To better evaluate the impact of student engagement strategies on the retention of underserved students, specifically first-generation students and African American students, a three-manuscript format is to be employed for this companion project. Each team

member is executing a study to explore an engagement strategy and its influence on the retention of an underserved student population. The authors also will serve as coauthors on each other's manuscripts.

Tucker Practitioner Statement

If one has ever completed a connect the dots activity as a child, he is probably familiar with the fact that every dot needed to create a picture is available on the page. All that is required to generate a finished product is for someone to connect the dots. Completing a college degree is similar to this in that many dots are on hand to assist students in obtaining the finished product of degree completion. Dots such as open admission, financial aid, scholarships, tutoring, advising, developmental education and first-year experience programs lend to the accessibility and affordability of higher education and stem from accountability expectations of institutions. Such dots are vital components to a student's success. Unfortunately, not all students successfully connect all the dots at their disposal and matriculate to college graduation. It is not enough simply to have the needed parts for a product if there are no instructions for assembly. Thus, I desire to help students connect dots and assemble components needed to build successful academic journeys.

As a young adult, I received much needed guidance and advice from family members who had previously navigated the waters of post-secondary education. Additionally, as a high school student, instructors prepared me for the rigor of college coursework. I am cognizant to the reality that not all students have support systems and experiences in their possession, as I did, that have prepared them to connect dots and assemble without instructions. Furthermore, some student groups have more struggles than others with managing the college waters and making their way to a credential gained. Hence is birthed my desire to help students and institutions connect the dots of accessibility, affordability and accountability in an attempt to prevent student attrition, especially as it pertains to traditionally underserved student groups with high attrition rates and low completion percentages. In my experience, critical elements in helping

underserved students to connect the dots are awareness and support. It is of utmost importance for practitioners to be aware of and comprehend that equity in education sometimes lacks as it relates to future and current students being exposed to admission and graduation requirements, having access to available resources and services, and having received appropriate knowledge concerning financial aid policies and procedures. Institutions and administrators have a responsibility to support personnel and programming that enhance the awareness of students and support them on their quest for the educational, career and personal advancement that should be available to all.

As an undergraduate, before ever becoming a Student Affairs Practitioner, I remember having a passion for sharing educational and job opportunities with my peers. As a child, I had an interest in being a teacher. Later, I found myself attracted to healthcare and seriously pursued a career in it on my college journey. As a college sophomore, I began working in the Chancellor's Office of my institution as a student worker. I loved working in a college office and felt that I could work in such an environment every day. Not long after graduating with a bachelor's degree in Biological Science, I enrolled in a higher education/student personnel graduate program. My first professional job was as a Regional Admissions Counselor. My second job after graduate school was as an Academic Advisor and College Life Instructor at a community college. It was at the community college where I really observed African American males not being retained and not persisting to graduation. This occurrence has troubled me because so many of these students were not having to pay for tuition and incurred minimal costs for other fees due to financial aid and scholarships awarded at our low-cost college. The opportunity was there, but something was missing as many young men were not returning to the institution. During my fourth year with the community college, I experienced a role change that

involved sponsoring the student recruiting team. Around 40 students usually serve in this student organization as college ambassadors and recruiters. While working with a student organization and with students who were involved in multiple campus activities, I became more aware of the positive impact of engagement on student success. I reflected on my experience as a student worker and how appreciative I was for the supportive and welcoming relationships with campus personnel, and I thought, “What if African American males were engaged more on campus with faculty, staff, students and supportive services? How could student engagement affect their success?” And so, as a Student Affairs Practitioner 10 years in the profession, I am asking and hoping to shed light on the “what if.”

Rush Practitioner Statement

I am extremely passionate about working with the first-generation students' population. I attribute a large part of my success as a counselor to the students I worked with at Student Support Services (TRIO program) at Mississippi State University. I feel this way because this was my first real exposure to working with college students. My higher education career began in 2002 as a workstudy student in the Office of Financial Aid. I mainly was responsible for data entry during that time. Then, I moved to the Registrar's Office. By working in the Registrar's office, I learned a lot about admission policies, the importance of record keeping and filing transcripts as well as preparing for graduation. While working as a student worker in the Registrar's Office, I had the opportunity to work with a young woman, the late Mrs. Stephanie Shields. Little did I know that Stephanie was going to open the opportunity which catapulted my career in higher education. Stephanie introduced me to Dr. Donnie Prisock, at that time, he was the Disability Support Services coordinator at MSU. Dr. Prisock was in need of a new assistant to help him in his office. This was my first time finding out about the TRiO program, Student Support Services. I had no idea the impact the work-study position would have on my future career in higher education.

The TRIO program is designed to work with first-generation, low-income, and students with disabilities. I realized after I started working at SSS as a student worker that I possibly could qualify for the program as a student. Although I was not FGS, I did qualify as low income. The program provided assistance with academic advising, counseling, and support to students. After completing my bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies, I enrolled in the M.S. in Counselor Education program in the spring of 2006 as well as started working in an entry level higher education position in Student Affairs at Mississippi State University. After graduating

college with my baccalaureate degree, I was hired full-time in the department. I worked as a Testing Coordinator and began my master's degree in Counseling. In the fall of 2007, I earned my M.S. in Counselor Education with an emphasis in Student Affairs in Higher Education. After completing my master's degree, I was promoted to counselor. The same program in which I had received services became the program that I was hired to help other students in a similar situation. It is very difficult to admit as a traditional or non-traditional student that you need help.

The first responsibility in my role as Intake Counselor was to actually read the grant so I would be knowledgeable about services available to students. The SSS grant is funded on a five year cycle. MSU Student Support Services program is funded to serve 160 eligible undergraduate students who are traditionally underrepresented in post-secondary education. I spent a great deal of time advertising and marketing the program to encourage participation.

After a year of hard work and increasing participation in the program over 75%, I was promoted to the Senior Counselor. I continued to create and foster lifelong relationships with students. My students needed someone to address their personal and academic needs. I also created a First Start program to increase retention and persistence rates within the program. The program consisted of first-year seminars to help students navigate the college process. I reassured my students that they were not alone and if they studied and worked hard that they will succeed. Many of them graduated from Mississippi State. I realized over time that while I loved my counseling role, I only had experience with working the traditional aged students.

After being at MSU as a student and employee for seven years, I wanted to venture out and gain experience in the community college system. In 2015, Mississippi Community College system was ranked as number one when it comes to states with the best community colleges

(WalletHub, 2015). At that time, we were in the Great Recession in the US and there was an increase in enrollment for community colleges. In 2008, because of the change in the economy, it appeared that most students graduating from high school were entering community colleges instead of four-year universities for various reasons. Some students enrolled because of financial reasons due to rising college tuition costs; others felt that it was a great time to enter college to earn a degree so they could be more marketable. In 2009, with two years of counseling experience from MSU I felt that it was a great time to move. I applied for a counselor position at Northwest Mississippi Community College and I have been employed here since July 2009. While working at Northwest, I found that I have also have an interest in academia. Since August 2011, I have taught Human Growth and Development as a traditional course. I have been an adjunct instructor teaching online General Psychology I since 2015.

After five years of counseling in the Student Development Center at Northwest Mississippi Community College - DeSoto Center, there was an opportunity to join the administrative team at DeSoto Center. I applied for the position, interviewed, and was hired as the Director of Evening School in August 2014. I am still in this position today. I was the first African American and female to ever hold this position. Today, I am currently supervising more than 60 adjunct faculty and 7 staff members in the evening school program.

McCloud Practitioner Statement

Having twelve years of experience in college career services and observing how underused the services are by marginalized populations has led me to study how internships can impact the retention or persistence of undergraduate African-American students at four-year colleges and universities. My experience in career services has included three professional positions. I was a Student Placement Specialist at the University of Mississippi for two years and the Assistant Director of Career Development for nine years. Currently, I am in my first year as Director of Career Planning and Development at the University of Tennessee at Martin.

Prior to entering the field of higher education, I worked for Youth Villages, a therapeutic foster care agency, as Special Project Manager. One of my job responsibilities was to teach a career development class to the older children to introduce them to possible career paths. After completing the course, I assisted the students in finding employment in their field of interest. Over the next few years, I noticed that many of the students who had real work experience wanted to go on to receive additional training or formal education in their field of interest. While their work experiences were not formal internships, in many ways there were similarities.

During my time at Youth Villages, I enrolled in the Master of Arts in Higher Education program. In past years, I had enrolled in several master's programs at other institutions and had not completed them. One of my first classes at the University of Mississippi, Career Counseling, an elective, sparked my interest. Combined with what I was learning through teaching life skills and career development, I quickly saw the value of career counseling, job correspondence development, internship experiences, and job search assistance. My first practicum experience formally introduced me to the University of Mississippi Career Center because I was actively involved in career fairs and the employer recruitment process. After the practicum experience, I

volunteered to assist the recruiting department at Youth Villages to attract prospective employees at regional career fairs. In effect, my practicum experience introduced me to the profession of career services, increased my persistence to finally complete a master's program and quite literally to understand the value of internships.

I began working at the University of Mississippi, a mid-sized public university in the Southeast in the spring of 2005 in the role of Student Placement Specialist. In this position, I was charged with the responsibilities of teaching, coordinating major career events, and insuring that students were prepared for the job search process. The University of Mississippi Career Center was the smallest in the Southeastern Conference with a staff of only seven full-time employees to serve a campus of over 21,000, including students enrolled on four branch campuses. Over the next two years, I saw an increase in the number of students and employers at the All-Majors Career Fair. There was also an increase in the number of employers who were interested in offering internships to current students in their recruitment programs.

In the fall of 2007, after much research, we hosted the inaugural internship fair, a career fair devoted to companies interested in recruiting interns and students who were in search of internships. The event was a success with over thirty employers and two hundred plus students in attendance. In the months that followed many of the employers returned to campus to host information sessions and recruit prospective interns. Data published by the National Association of Colleges and Employers that same year stated that 68% of all students who completed internships acquired jobs within sixty days after graduation. I noticed that about 50% of employers that were recruiting at the University of Mississippi at that time were making full-time job offers to their interns.

During the 2008–2009 school year, the University of Mississippi Career Center submitted a grant proposal seeking funding for a graduate assistant position whose time would be completely devoted to the internship process. The Intern-Net program was created to provide assistance to students in search of internships, educating students about internships through outreach, and reaching out to prospective employers to identify quality internship opportunities. We soon partnered with first-year-experience instructors and transfer orientation instructors to make sure students were educated about internships early in their academic career. In addition, we incorporated an internship day during Career Readiness Week, a week aimed at preparing students to make the transition from college to the world of work.

From 2009–2014, there was a steady increase in students who needed assistance with acquiring internships. The University of Mississippi Career Center went from professional staff assisting students with internships to having a graduate assistant who coordinated the Intern-Net program along with the current staff trying to meet the needs of students and employers. As the statistician for the office, I witnessed a constant growth each year in the number of students that we assisted. We went from seeing two or three students a week to more than twelve students a week. During peak times, students often had to wait several weeks to get assistance. One statistic that we did not keep was the demographics on the students who came in for assistance. Through general observation I noticed that while the numbers of students overall increased, the number of minority students was very low.

In 2014, I took a more active role in presenting to students the value of internships. I conducted about half of the internship presentations for the University of Mississippi Career Center during the 2014–2015 school year in addition to my regular responsibilities. Many of the presentations were requested by different groups in the community, but I also proactively reached

out to organizations with high numbers of marginalized groups: historically African-American fraternities and sororities, first generation sections of the freshman experience classes, transfer classes, student athletes, professional minority organizations, and summer bridge programs. In the months that followed, we saw an increase in the number of minorities inquiring about internships and securing internships. In preparing the annual report for the department, I noted the increase in minority traffic.

After being selected to be on a university retention committee, I reviewed our services to determine what the Career Center was doing to meet the goals of the *2020 Strategic Plan* for the university. I examined my role as a practitioner as well as our departmental function and its impact on student retention. As I studied more about high impact educational practices, I identified those practices that had the greatest connection to my professional role and devoted more time to their exploration and practice.

In the fall of 2017, I left the University of Mississippi and returned to my alma mater, the University of Tennessee at Martin, where I was given the task of building and serving as the director of a brand new career center. We used Gallup Poll results from UT Martin alumni, National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) benchmarks, and the *Soar in Four* funding model, a state model design to help students graduate and be career ready in four years, to shape our office. Each academic year is the focal point for specific career competencies: freshman year (Exploration), sophomore year (Engagement), junior year (Experience) and senior year (Enhancement). In addition to the traditional career developmental services and employer services, our office focuses on the centralization of the internship process campus-wide and places emphasis on minority affairs. I was also given the task of championing retention of African-American students at the university. Through our work I believe that we can not only

prepare students to make the transition to the world of work, but we can be agents for change in the retention and persistence of students at UT Martin.

SUMMARY

This dissertation in practice (DiP) incorporates three manuscripts that were developed in part by a three-member research team. Team members were part of the Ed.D. cohort program at the University of Mississippi (UM), a member of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate is a national initiative designed to enhance the education doctorate by making it a more attractive degree for academic practitioners and leaders within the higher education system. The CPED design develops scholarly practitioners with professional work experience, skills, and knowledge to identify and solve problems of practice through collaboration.

This collaborative study examined engagement strategies and their impact on underserved students. During the second semester of the second year of the coursework, program faculty identified similar individual research interests and created collaborative teams based on interests and skill sets. The research team represented in this dissertation was comprised of Emily Tucker, Tonyalle Rush, and Mark McCloud. The research team had a common research interest of working with “at-risk” student populations and wanted to create a study to help make a difference in those students’ lives. The team wanted to explore this problem of practice by focusing on three different target populations: African American males and their success with a support group, African American students and their impact of participating in internships, and first-generation college students entering college as non-traditional, commuter students.

Each researcher developed his or her own research questions which will be addressed in their individual manuscripts. This DiP will be outlined as: collaborative introduction, Manuscript 1: Exploration of a minority male support program as a method to improve academic success lead authored by Emily Tucker; Manuscript 2: The perceptions and experiences of first-generation college students at a commuter campus at a two-year institution lead authored by Tonyalle Rush; Manuscript 3: The African-American internship experience lead authored by Mark McCloud, and a collaborative conclusion.

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MANUSCRIPT 1:
EXPLORATION OF A MINORITY MALE SUPPORT PROGRAM AS A METHOD TO
IMPROVE ACADEMIC SUCCESS

MANUSCRIPT I: EXPLORATION OF A MINORITY MALE SUPPORT PROGRAM AS A
METHOD TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Completion of a post-secondary degree is vital to securing employment in the United States. One study revealed that only 27% of high school graduates without a post-secondary degree were employed full-time (“No College Education,” 2012). This staggering statistic is unfortunate for many individuals, families, and the nation. A college degree can lead not only to employment, but also higher wages for the individual and, ultimately, an improved economy for the country (“No College Education,” 2012). On the other hand, the lack of a college degree can severely limit the economic opportunity of individuals (“No College Education,” 2012).

Unfortunately for the American economy, some high school graduates never enroll in college, and of those who do, an alarmingly large number of them do not complete. The U. S. Department of Education reported that its 2010 cohort of data reporting community colleges had a three-year completion rate of 20% (Bailey, 2016). A little better, but still not acceptable, is the 59% six-year graduation rate for the 2009 cohort of first time-full time students pursuing a bachelor's degree, reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2017).

The unwanted trend of high attrition rates is felt throughout the country; however, there is disparity among retention rates across student populations. African American and first-generation students, especially, have been found to be retained at a rate lower than their counterparts. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported of the first time, full-time students who enrolled during the 2003-2004 school year, that only 51% of African

American students completed a bachelor's degree by June 2009, trailing all other reported racial groups. African American male students have been found to trail African American female, Asian and European American students, in terms of academic performance, persistence, and completion (Warde, 2008). It has been reported by the U. S. Department of Education that 11.5% of African American male students will not complete the first year of college enrollment, and an alarming 48.9% will have no degree or credential to show for their time spent in college after three years (Wood, 2012). In 2016, only 28.3% of African American males were reported to possess an associate's degree or higher, and only 20.4% were believed to hold a bachelor's degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2016). For the same year, 49.9% of White males held an associate's degree or higher and 39.5% a bachelor's degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2016). With the below par retention and completion rates of African American males, there is value in researching methods for improving the educational outcomes of this student group. For this reason, we elected to study a student support program that primarily serves African American male students and to investigate to determine if participation in such a program affects the educational outcomes of African American male college students.

African American students are many times underprepared for higher education due to socioeconomic status and attendance at low-performing high schools. Black students are usually more likely than White students to enter college as a first-generation student, with job and family obligations, and in need of financial support (Greene, Marti, & McClenney, 2008). Students who have a greater risk of underperforming in college, such as African American, first-generation, and low-income students, have been categorized as “at-risk” (Barrett, Ghezzi, Satterfield, & Trott, 2015). Students categorized as such are at risk of having subpar engagement, achievement, and retention rates due to their unfamiliarity with the college

environment, poor academic preparation, and lack of direction and support from family members (Barrett et al., 2015).

Social mobility describes the role of education as a means for individuals to be more competitive for social positions in society (Labaree, 1997). African American males do not graduate at rates comparable with other groups, as many consider college graduation an avenue for upward social and economic mobility (Wood, 2012). Although African American students may have subpar college success statistics, they tend to have educational aspirations that are equal to, if not higher than, their non-African American counterparts (Strayhorn and DeVita, 2010, p. 90). Achievement of the aspirations and educational goals of African American students can be crucial to social mobility (Labaree, 1997). Students pursue an education to obtain a job or career for financial stability and improved quality of life. Degrees and credentials obtained by students can help them to attain jobs and promotions that affect their economic status and position in society. American education fails miserably to fulfill the goal of social mobility when African Americans enroll in college but do not progress and earn a qualification that offers social and economic stability.

Upon college entry, many African Americans struggle to adjust to college and successfully complete coursework. The failure to adjust and succeed leads to student attrition, and, ultimately, reduced dividends for the student. Among the Fall 2015 entering college students who institutions reported to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, African American students had the lowest persistence rate with only 66.9% of students returning to an institution (2017). When students do not persist on their educational journey, not only does the American educational system disappoint students in the effort to gain social mobility, but also it sometimes moves students backwards in their social climb. As African American students

struggle academically, they are put at a disadvantage for receiving merit-based scholarships and financial assistance, which could allow students to continue their academic quests toward college completion and job attainment (Brooks, 2012). Although not all scholarships and grants are based on academic merit, failure to obtain merit-based scholarships can sometimes lead to students acquiring loans to fund higher education and fill gaps to cover college costs while in search of social mobility. Without completion or a credential gained, students are likely to fall deep into debt and far away from social and economic gains, without a high-wage job to aid in loan repayment.

In an effort to examine college persistence among underserved student populations, a three-manuscript model was utilized in this study to highlight different opportunities for improving the persistence of underserved student groups. The lead author for the current manuscript focused on enhancing the college success of African American males by evaluating the impact of a minority male support program on student engagement and impending success.

STUDY OVERVIEW

African American male students have not persisted to completion at the same rate as other students, and this trend and its impact have been troublesome, not only to students, but to the nation (Warde, 2008). African American male students have failed to persist at a rate consistent with other demographic groups and because they are categorized as an at-risk population, there was merit to studying ways to increase the persistence of this student population.

This study examined a support program for this underserved population and its impact on student engagement and student success. The goal of this study was not merely to establish whether a support program specifically for minority males is successful in improving student success, but the lead author sought to establish if such a program affects engagement levels and, ultimately, the academic success of African American males. The reported engagement levels and academic records of students at an institution where such a support program is in place was compared with the same items for students at a college where a minority support program is absent, in hopes of providing evidence that this type of program is a valuable resource for higher education. Finally, our hope is that other institutions will follow suit and implement such a program to foster the academic success of African American males.

Other elements of this examination involved analysis of data from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). This survey, which originated at The University of Texas at Austin in 2001, has been given annually on community college campuses

to gauge student involvement in educational activities (McClenney, 2007). CCSSE data has revealed the frequency and nature of students' reports of interactions with faculty, staff and other students, as well as other educational involvement (McClenney, 2007). Colleges have utilized results from CCSSE assessments to analyze practices, plan programming, improve graduation rates and much more (Price & Tovar, 2014). The CCSSE survey instrument has served to investigate student engagement as it relates to five distinct categories: active and collaborative learning, student effort, academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, and support for learners (Price & Tovar, 2014).

The CCSSE results of African American male students at a college where a support program for minority males is in place were compared to the survey results of African American males nationwide and at a college where no minority male support program is in place. Differences in the frequencies of reported student-faculty interactions, participation in activities that provide support for learners, student effort in the educational process, and participation in active and collaborative learning were observed. This study endeavored to determine if African American male student involvement in academic support activities and engagement with faculty and other students increases at an institution where there is access to a minority male support program and its services.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action*, Vincent Tinto (2012) reasoned that institutional quests to mend the wounds of student attrition should begin during the first year of college and should be focused on the classroom. Additionally, he asserted that an institution's campus environment should be one that nurtures student completion (Tinto, 2012). He upheld that a campus climate that is conducive to student success should incorporate academic and social student support, evaluation and feedback, high expectations, and academic and social engagement (Tinto, 2012). This needed student engagement has been described as student participation in educational activities and interactions with faculty, staff and other students (McClenney 2007). While student engagement has been regarded as indispensable to student success, challenges abound in linking African American males with engagement and subsequent academic success.

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

It has been deemed true and is unfortunate that the dismal performance of some African American males could be attributed to the perceived climate of the college. Some researchers have attested that African American students are more likely to view institutions as being unfair and to expect school personnel to possess racial biases (Bush & Bush, 2010). Researchers also have noted that African American students are more likely than White students to have undesirable class encounters (Bush & Bush, 2010). Racism received from faculty has been regarded as a crucial issue guiding the academic workings and success of African American

males (Wood, Bush, Hicks, & Kambui, 2016). Preconceived ideas about African American males, such as they are lazy, dangerous and uneducated, has obstructed the efforts of some African American male students to seek out relationships, direction and support from campus personnel (Strayhorn, 2008).

The presence of faculty and student engagement has been found to be a vital component of ensuring that an institution comprises a nurturing and supportive campus environment. Although research has demonstrated that the interaction between students and faculty can positively affect the academic success of African American males, some African American male students have hesitated to engage with faculty members due to anxiety concerning appearing ill equipped for higher education. Furthermore, some have dreaded being in an environment where they are unwanted (Bauer, 2014). Students' failure to take part in involvement with faculty, both in and out of the classroom, has prevented them from achieving engagement experiences that Tinto (2012) cites as being crucial to curbing student attrition.

Many African American students attend secondary institutions that are poorly funded, inadequately staffed and unprepared to equip students with needed tools for college success. The discouraging impressions of institutions and personnel that many African American males possess can lead to them not seeking the help, guidance, and resources needed to combat preexisting factors that lead to their unsatisfactory success rates and, ultimately, attrition (Bush & Bush, 2010). This is unfortunate, as many African American males are unarmed with the tools needed to withstand the rigors of post-secondary education and in desperate need of the attention and resources that could be afforded to them.

In addition to substandard college preparation, other challenges have existed external to the institution's responsibility and control that have shaped the engagement and success pictures of African American male students.

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

Like other researchers, Strayhorn (2008) noted the value of support from faculty and staff, but he also mentioned the importance of peer relationships to students. Value has been found in gleaning support and guidance from fellow students; however, in some cases, African American students may not have this benefit and, in contrast, feel alone because of the lack of a large population of African American students to look to for this needed support (Strayhorn, 2008).

In 2012, Strayhorn also considered the benefit of student satisfaction with college on retention. In his 2012 study, he focused not only on institutional agents that affect student satisfaction, but also, external influences and student characteristics that can guide a student's interactions within the college environment and impact satisfaction (Strayhorn, 2012). This study found academic integration to be less impactful on student satisfaction and retention than social integration influences (Strayhorn, 2012). Age and family commitments were both found to have an effect on the college satisfaction of African American men (Strayhorn, 2012). Older African American males and those with family obligations that affected their academic endeavors had lower levels of satisfaction (Strayhorn, 2012).

Wood et al. (2016), too, noted external environmental factors as being elements steering the success of African American males. Wood et al. (2016) mentioned family responsibilities,

work obligations, and finances as having a bearing on the persistence and success of African American male community college students.

Additionally, Wood et al. (2016) classified psychological factors as being a determinant affecting the persistence and success of African American male college students. Psychological issues such as the student's confidence in their academic ability and belief in the practicality of their degree were believed to be fundamental matters of concern related to the academic efforts and outcomes of African American males (Wood et al., 2016).

With the wide array of external and institutional influences on the lacking engagement and the shortcoming success of African American males, much needed solutions to improve the engagement and success of this population have been proposed.

SOLUTIONS

Wood et al. (2016) argued that staff should be held accountable for achieving an environment advantageous to the academic achievement of African American males in community colleges. To work towards prevention of unwelcoming campus environments for African American male students, Wood et al. (2016) recommended institutions make new employees aware of expectations related to relationships with Black males. Additionally, Wood et al. (2016) suggested that colleges identify personnel who do not provide a positive climate for African American males and observe the academic performance of African American males, as a means to distinguish faculty members who are negative influences on the student success of this population. To diminish the amount of faculty members who occupy and display racial biases, the authors encouraged the use of faculty training on microaggressions and stereotypes (Wood et al., 2016). Bush and Bush (2010) suggested hiring more African American personnel, who

would be interested in the achievement of African American males. Strayhorn (2008), too, recommended the hiring of more African American instructors, due to the existing negative stereotypes concerning African American males.

It is not merely enough for a campus to have a welcoming environment, but to improve faculty-student engagement and help in rectifying the substandard success rates of African American males, institutions must also consider what practices or elements lead to greater faculty-student engagement. Wood and Ireland (2014) conducted research utilizing African American male CCSSE reported data from the 2011 three-year cohort to unearth elements that affected faculty-student engagement at community colleges. From this examination, the researchers found learning communities, reading remediation, study skills courses, and participation in student orientation as factors leading to improved faculty-student engagement, with learning communities being the greatest contributor. Institutional climate factors, such as sense of belonging and diversity, were also observed to have a positive influence on faculty-student engagement (Wood & Ireland, 2014). Wood and Ireland's (2014) study heralded the value of faculty-student engagement, campus climate, learning communities and the academic and social engagement that Tinto (2012) deemed as imperative to student success. Also revealing significance to faculty-student engagement and campus climate was Bush and Bush's (2010) study which divulged interaction with faculty to be a strong predictor of African American male student retention and grade point average and campus climate as a strong predictor of retention and graduation rate.

Like Tinto (2012) and Wood and Ireland (2014), Wood et al. (2016) also emphasized the worth of academic and social engagement and designated academic behaviors as one of their highlighted factors affecting the persistence and success of African American male community

college students. Wood et al. (2016) noted actions such as class attendance, faculty interactions, studying, and utilizing institutional academic support services as being complementary to student success. Class attendance, they found, was not only beneficial in learning important class content and instruction, but also meaningful in forming relationships with other students (Wood et al., 2016). In this study, supportive relationships from peers and campus organization involvement that promote academic activity and growth were championed as being more profound to the success of African American males than mere social relationships and organizations, which may actually be a diversion from the learning process. The authors also proposed that institutions should consider employing an early warning system to discover students who are demonstrating problematic academic progress.

Strayhorn's (2008) research on the relationships between support for students and satisfaction with college and academic performance, proved that engagement with other students and faculty is important to the success of African American male students. Strayhorn's (2008) study resulted in data that revealed a positive correlation between helpful campus relationships and student satisfaction. With an increase in positive relationships for African American male students, it can be expected that improved academic achievement would result from the enhanced satisfaction with the college (Strayhorn, 2008). Strayhorn (2008) emphasized the importance of African American male students forming significant, long-term relationships that can aid in accessing guidance while on the college journey. Tinto (2012) also expressed the importance of social relationships to student retention, as social involvement within the campus community can lead to students having a sense of belonging, which in turn, can positively affect retention. Institutions have an array of methods to choose for implementation to engage African American males in supportive relationships. Strayhorn (2008) cited programming such as

precollege programs, high school to college bridge programs and federal Trio programs as valuable avenues for institutions to incorporate to assist in building connections between African American males and others on campus that could actively support them.

Along with forming peer relationships with any student, it was revealed from African American male participants in Bush and Bush's (2010) study at a California community college that there was a need for African American males to have an avenue to engage with other African American males. The student participants in Bush and Bush's (2010) study, which sought to observe the academic performance of African American males in the California Community College system and the impact of institutional factors on the students' success, saw a need for the institution to incorporate groups, mentorships and programs that acknowledged the cultural and societal issues facing African American males. Bush and Bush (2010) proposed that community colleges consider incorporating programs specifically for African American males, such as peer support groups, faculty-student mentorships, and learning communities, to improve the academic performance of African American males.

No matter how strong and consistent institutional efforts are to improve campus climate and academic and social engagement for African American male students, challenges external to the academe may loom. To combat the challenge of balancing academic responsibilities with family duties, college personnel should consider incorporating family into campus programming and inviting family members to events to help support African American males (Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) also advised that institutions consider making special efforts to incorporate programming and campus services to support African American males and make services available longer hours and with available childcare for those with family devotions. With the finding that families have played important roles in the support of African American

males, colleges should consider implementing parent relations or family relations programming to promote greater family support, fewer distractions to the educational process and improved retention (Strayhorn, 2012).

Another application of Strayhorn's (2012) conclusions could be in the advising process of colleges. Advisors should be aware of student background qualities and their weight on student satisfaction, and advisors should incorporate strategies during intrusive advising to contest external factors affecting student retention (Strayhorn, 2012). Similar to Strayhorn (2012), Wood et al. (2016) called for advisors to be more deliberate in asking questions concerning external dynamics when they meet with African American males. In addition, Wood et al. (2016) recognized that faculty should be more alert and observant of changes in the academic functions of students that may be a result of external circumstances.

Other probable external influencers of the African American male college experience are those psychological in nature. To contend such challenges, Wood et al. (2016) advocated that institutions should conduct testing to affirm students who have low levels of student efficacy and negative academic utility perceptions, and institutions should continue to observe those students.

MINORITY MALE SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Encompassing many of the aforementioned solutions are minority male programs, which some educators have encouraged the implementation of to improve the academic outcomes of African American male students (Barker & Avery, 2012). Such programming embodies many of the aspects that have been regarded as indispensable to the academic success of African American males, such as mentorships, faculty-student engagement, peer relationships, academic advising, academic support activities, and social activities. Examples of such programs are

Minority Male Initiatives (MMIs) (Wood, 2012). These programs serve to improve the retention and persistence of minority male community college students through targeted student support activities and research (Wood, 2012). Available to assist and support institutions with minority male programming, the American Association of Community Colleges has a data bank of MMIs, nationwide (Wood, 2012). Likewise, many senior colleges have instituted African American male programs to encourage the engagement and academic success of African American male students (Barker & Avery, 2012).

Also signifying the need for measures to improve the retention of African American males and the validity in a minority male support program was the establishment of the Minority Male Community College Collaborative and the National Consortium on College Men of Color at San Diego State University (<http://cceal.org/about-us/>). These two organizations offer support and knowledge to strengthen the efforts of individuals and institutions who support minority male students (<http://cceal.org/about-us/>).

With the appearance of more support programs for minority males and education funding dwindling, it is of the utmost importance to institutions that are considering implementing such a program that this type of educational practice is effective in impacting the success of minority males. With scholars such as Tinto (2012), and many others, having stressed the importance of campus climate on student success, minority male programming may be the remedy needed to alleviate some of the uncertainties that African American males harbor on college campuses. Flynn (2015) presented the idea that in support programs where student shame is evaded, programs for at-risk urban students are successful. It was the lead author's intention to examine an established minority male program and student responses to the student engagement survey questions posed in the CCSSE instrument and to ascertain if students are more likely to engage

and be successful as result of the presence of such a program. The CCSSE questionnaire is fitting for a study focusing on minority males and minority male programming, as it measures student-reported data on faculty-student engagement, active and collaborative learning, and support for learners, all areas which have been found to cultivate the academic success of African American males (Bush & Bush, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; Tinto, 2012; Wood et al., 2016; Wood & Ireland, 2014).

METHODS

The research questions for this study were as follows: (a) Are African American male students more likely to be engaged and utilize student support resources when their institution offers a program specifically for African American male students? (b) Does student engagement, as a part of a minority male student support program, affect the success of African American male college students? To embark on the journey to respond to these questions, the lead author was granted approval to conduct research by The University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board and the community college board, representing the two institutions studied. The minority male support program selected for study was located at a small community college in the rural Southeast, where 63.5% of students are African American. For ease of reading, the institution and program will be referred to as South Community College (SCC) and Trailblazers program, respectively. Also selected for study was another small community college in the rural Southeast, with an African American student population of 35%. For ease of reading, this institution absent of a minority male support program will be referred to as Eastern Community College (ECC).

The Trailblazers program strives to improve the academic success and persistence of African American male students through targeted programming such as, mentoring, academic, social and financial support services. The institution was awarded funding for this program through a Predominantly Black Institution Program (PBI) grant through the U. S. Department of

Education (<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/pbihea/index.html>). The PBI program affords eligible institutions the opportunity to better serve low and middle-income African American students through program development, by means of formula and competitive grant funds (<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/pbihea/index.html>). The U. S. Congress passed legislation in 2008 to institute funding for colleges that serve African American students, but are not Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs) and benefitting from funding designated for those institutions through the Higher Education Act's Title III Black college program (Dervarics, 2007, 2008). Eligibility for PBI funds requires that institutions' enrollments consist of 40% African American students and at least 50% low-income or first-generation students, among other requirements (Dervarics, 2008; <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/pbihea/eligibility.html>).

The Trailblazers program operates with an office staff, group mentors, peer mentors, and lab facilitators who support Trailblazers participants by providing academic advising, tutoring services, and personal counseling. The PBI grant also afforded the Trailblazers program the opportunity to have a textbook loan service and tutoring software accessible as resources to program participants. The Trailblazers program not only offered these services, but the program sought to increase African American male interactions with academic advising and personal counseling and increase the number of African American males making use of the learning center. Other goals of the support program were to increase African American male persistence, graduation and enrollment (U.S. Department of Education Grant Performance Report).

In addition to observing and contrasting African American male college success at these two institutions, this study also considered student levels of engagement at both institutions via reported student responses from the CCSSE. Thus, SCC institutional 2012 CCSSE data was

obtained for the study, as well as, 2012 CCSSE data for ECC. Survey responses of African American males from these two institutions were compared in an effort to examine potential differences in student effort, engagement with other students, engagement with faculty and staff, and involvement with academic support services. In addition to detecting if an institution with a minority male program averages more responses directed towards greater student engagement than an institution that does not employ such a program, the author of this study ventured to compare SCC survey results with the results of African American male students, nationwide. A national CCSSE data sample was acquired from the 2014 CCSSE cohort (2012-2014).

To investigate any relationships between student responses and the presence of a minority male support program, a one-way analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) test was utilized with the independent variable being student placement at an institution with a program or without, and the dependent variable being survey response. The one-way ANOVA test was administered to yield an answer for the first research question for this study: (a) Are African American male students more likely to be engaged and utilize student support resources when their institution offers a program specifically for African American male students?

Institutional data on African American male students was requested from ECC. It is this institutional data on African American males, such as credit hours achieved and GPA, that was compared to records received from SCC on their Trailblazers participants and all African American male students to respond to the second research question: (b) Does student engagement, as a part of a minority male student support program, affect the success of African American male college students? To further evaluate the efficiency of the Trailblazers program and answer this second research question, it was the lead author's objective to weigh the academic results of Trailblazers participants against those of non-participating African American

male SCC students. Academic results that were assessed consisted of GPA and credit hours. To accomplish this analysis, a one-way ANOVA test was exercised to assess the success rates of student groups. The independent variable was participant or non-participant in a minority male support program. The dependent variable was an academic success measure. Two one-way ANOVA tests were implemented, using term credit hours earned and term GPA each as dependent variables.

Through examination of a support program specifically for African American males, this study's lead author hoped to uncover if such a program influences the educational outcomes of African American male students. Furthermore, the author hoped to determine if the engagement of African American male students is swayed as a result of the presence of such a program. The results of this study are significant in the quest to combat the disappointing success and graduation rates of African American male students and the success of African American male students is significant to the nation.

RESULTS

The undertaking of this study was to expose if there were differences in the engagement and success of African American males at an institution that housed a support program for minority males. To resolve this inquiry, data on African American males at an institution with such a program and those at an institution lacking such a program was analyzed. Tables 1-2 highlight descriptive data on the total populations and African American male populations of both institutions, illuminating similarities in these two rural, southeastern community colleges, and the legitimacy in comparison for the purpose of this study.

Table 1.

Spring 2012 Institutional Characteristics

Institution	SCC	ECC ^a
Race		
African American	63.5%	35%
White	34.5%	63%
Other	2%	2%
Gender		
Female	64%	63%
Male	36%	37%
Pell Eligibility	69%	69%
Residency		
Resident	89%	98%
Non-resident	11%	n2%
Total Enrollment	3,313	6,002

Note. The SCC Characteristics are from the institution's Computer & Information Technology Services Department (personal communication, August 1, 2017); the ECC Characteristics are

from the institution's Office of Institutional Research & Effectiveness (personal communication, August 3, 2017).

^aEstimated.

Table 2.

Spring 2012 African American Male Student Characteristics

	SCC Trailblazers Participants	SCC Non-Trailblazers Participants	SCC All African American Males	ECC African American Males
Average Age	25	28	28	26
Entering ACT	15	15	15	15

Note. The SCC data is from the institution's Computer & Information Technology Services Department (personal communication, January 5, 2018); the ECC data is from the institution's Telecommunications & Information Services Department (personal communication, September 1, 2017).

To address the likelihood of African American males being more engaged when their institution offers a program specifically for African American males, CCSSE results were collected from each institution and a national sample. Both institutions administered the survey in 2012. Thus, all data collected from the institutions is from 2012. The 2014 national CCSSE cohort includes data from 2012, 2013, and 2014.

CCSSE benchmark scores were calculated based on student responses to a related group of survey questions. Associated questions were grouped into five benchmark areas significant to student engagement. This study observed and compared scores for four of the five benchmarks: active and collaborative learning, student effort, student-faculty interaction, and support for learners. This study did not employ the academic challenge benchmark. Students responded to CCSSE questions on a scale that varied from 1-4 to 1-7, acknowledging their level of

involvement with academic related activities, their degree of participation in institutional supportive services, their assessment of peer and staff relationships, and their perception of and satisfaction with institutional services (CCCSE, 2014).

Raw benchmark scores for the four areas observed were received for African American males at SCC, ECC, and the national cohort. The raw benchmark scores for individual students were calculated by, first, reverse coding needed items. Individual survey items were reversed coded so that the highest possible response to an item would be the answer with the most favorable student result. Since the number of responses for items varied, items were translated to a common scale by taking a student's answer choice and subtracting one and dividing that number by the highest possible response minus one ($(\text{student answer}-1)/(\text{highest possible response}-1)$). This allowed for the score of all questions to range between 0-1. If a student received a score of 1 for an item, that indicated they chose the most favorable selection concerning student engagement. The next step in achieving raw benchmark scores was by totaling the scores for all questions in a specific benchmark area and dividing by the total number of items in that area. This last step was done for each area and yielded the raw benchmark scores that were utilized for this study in active and collaborative learning, student effort, student-faculty interaction and support for learners. The closer a raw benchmark score was to 1 signified more positive responses to the items. CCSSE benchmark scores in Table 3 were attained by averaging the benchmark scores for African American males at SCC, those at ECC, and those included in the national cohort. The SCC CCSSE scores included all African American males and did not distinguish between Trailblazers participants and non-participants (CCCSE, 2014).

Not only were the raw benchmark scores gathered, but they were also analyzed using a one-way ANOVA test to establish if either institution had a mean benchmark score that was

significantly larger than the other institution or national cohort of students. The analysis was run with a significance level of .05, and Tukey and Dunnett's C were the significance tests utilized.

The CCSSE benchmark scores revealed higher means for SCC African American males than the national cohort in all four areas. Although higher, an analysis of variance showed that none were significantly different. Additionally, the SCC mean scores were higher than ECC means for active and collaborative learning and student effort. Yet, it was not a significant difference. ECC African American males produced higher means than the national cohort in all areas except for student effort. The ECC mean scores were larger than SCC means for the student-faculty interaction and support for learner benchmarks. None of the observed CCSSE benchmark scores were significantly different. Due to the analysis of variance tests revealing no significant differences in CCSSE scores, no post hoc tests were employed to determine where significant differences existed.

Table 3.

2012 CCSSE Mean Benchmark Scores for African American Males

	SCC (2012)	National Cohort (2012, 2013, & 2014)	ECC (2012)
Active and Collaborative Learning Benchmark Score			
Mean	.447	.414	.416
SD	.193	.182	.185
Student Effort Benchmark Score			
Mean	.517	.508	.478
SD	.161	.160	.180
Student-Faculty Interaction Benchmark Score			
Mean	.468	.466	.482
SD	.218	.207	.226
Support for Learners Benchmark Score			
Mean	.561	.526	.581
SD	.235	.230	.256

Note. The SCC CCSSE data is from the SCC Office of Institutional Effectiveness (personal communication, August 16, 2017); the National Cohort CCSSE data is from E. M. Bohlig (personal communication, March 20, 2017); the ECC CCSSE data is from the institution's Strategic Planning & Assessment Department (personal communication, April 7, 2017).

To speak to the question of student engagement as a part of a minority male support program affecting the success of African American male students, semester grade point averages

and credit hours completed for the Spring 2012 semester were collected for African American males attending SCC and ECC. The SCC data contained three groups of African American males: those participating in the Trailblazers program, non-participants and all African American males. To determine if the minority male support program had a significant impact on student success, a one-way ANOVA test was conducted with a significance level of .05, and Tukey and Dunnett's C were employed as significance tests. Table 4 contains the computed means for Spring 2012 grade point averages and credit hours earned for all four examined groups. Table 5 displays the ANOVA table for the GPA and credit hour means among the institutions. The one-way ANOVA analysis disclosed Trailblazers participants having the highest grade point averages for the semester, followed by SCC non-participants. Through utilization of the Dunnett's C post hoc test, the analysis of variance further revealed that the mean for ECC African American male GPAs ($M = 1.754$) was significantly lower than SCC Trailblazers participants ($M = 2.634$), non-participants ($M = 2.619$), and all SCC African American males ($M = 2.612$).

SCC non-participants and all SCC African American males had the greatest means for Spring 2012 credit hours earned, followed by Trailblazers participants and ECC African American males, respectively. Tukey was the post hoc test administered and it determined that the ECC mean for credit hours earned ($M = 7.629$) was significantly lower than SCC non-participants ($M = 11.102$) and all SCC African American males ($M = 11.039$).

Table 4.

Spring 2012 Mean African American Male Grade Point Averages and Credit Hours by Institution

	SCC Trailblazers Participants (<i>N</i> = 49)	SCC Non-Trailblazers Participants (<i>N</i> = 314)	SCC All African American Males (<i>N</i> = 357)	ECC African American Males (<i>N</i> = 560)
GPA				
Mean	2.634	2.619	2.612	1.754
SD	.854	.926	.916	1.230
Credit Hours				
Mean	10.102	11.102	11.039	7.629
SD	5.687	7.448	7.212	5.839

Note. The SCC data is from the institution's Computer & Information Technology Services Department (personal communication, January 5, 2018); the ECC data is from the institution's Telecommunications & Information Services Department (personal communication, September 1, 2017).

Table 5.

Spring 2012 Mean African American Male Grade Point Averages and Credit Hours among Institutions

	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
GPA					
Between Groups	234.248	3	78.083	68.832	.000
Within Groups	1447.477	1276	1.134		
Total	1681.725	1279			
Credit Hours					
Between Groups	3629.674	3	1209.891	27.330	.000
Within Groups	56487.422	1276	44.269		
Total	60117.097	1279			

DISCUSSION

The findings from the study did not deliver overly convincing evidence that the presence of a minority male support program lends itself to increased engagement among African American males as measured by CCSSE. Although African American males at SCC averaged more positive survey responses concerning engagement than the national cohort in all four observed benchmarks, there was not a significant difference between any of the means. Likewise, SCC benchmark scores were higher than ECC for active and collaborative learning and student effort, yet not significantly. Not only did SCC not show significantly more appealing means, they had lower benchmark scores than ECC in the student-faculty interaction and support for learner groupings. The CCSSE results did verify that African American males at SCC responded more satisfactorily to the student engagement questionnaire than the national cohort; however, the survey outcomes were not enough to substantiate the claim that the presence of a minority male support program leads to more engagement and utilization of support resources by African American males.

The revelation of a significant difference in the grade point averages between ECC African American males and SCC Trailblazers participants provided support that student engagement, as a part of a minority male program, may affect the success of African American male college students. Additionally, SCC non-Trailblazers participants and all SCC African American males produced significantly higher grade point averages than ECC African American males. This speaks to the idea of the mere presence of a minority male program increasing

African American male student success, even for those who do not participate in the minority male program. Museus, Yi, and Saelua (2017) presented the idea that a culturally engaging campus environment impacts a student's sense of belonging. They argue that the resulting sense of belonging increases student attributes which contribute to student success, such as motivation and self-efficacy. Museus et al. (2017) detail a culturally engaged campus environment as possessing opportunities for students to connect with personnel and other students who understand their culture, occasions for resources and support to be made available to students and instances where students feel that their cultural background is important to their institution. Strengthening the suggestion that the presence of the Trailblazers program affected the success of all African American males at SCC was the finding that there was also a significant difference in the credit hours completed between ECC and SCC non-Trailblazers participants and all SCC African American males. The Trailblazer program embodies many of the tools researchers have found beneficial to the retention and success of minority males. The program's application of these tools such as student-faculty engagement, mentoring and academic support for African American males undoubtedly played a role in SCC's substantially higher grade point and credit hour averages (Bush & Bush, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008; Tinto, 2012; Wood et al., 2016).

While student engagement, as measured by CCSSE, was not found to increase as a result of the presence of a minority male program, that does not take away from the legitimacy of such a program due to the nature of the findings. The CCSSE results were based on student perceptions and reports of behavior, and a different indirect measure may be more appropriate to assess African American male student engagement. The grade point and credit hour findings were based on actual occurrences that were supported by grades and credit hours achieved, and

not just perceptions. Therefore, the lead author of this study concludes that, although a minority male program was not proven through this investigation to lead to greater minority male engagement, it may have played a role in greater minority male success and, thus, is worthy of consideration and implementation by other institutions.

It is necessary that institutions serve and meet the needs of all students. Not all student needs are the same and some may require more service than others in the quest for degree completion. Colleges have an obligation to reach out to African American male students. That is not a question. The question is, “how should institutions make the effort to reach African American male students?” As a practitioner, the lead author of this study has found that budgets are tight and personnel are stretched. However, findings from research and this study appear to be easy to implement and manipulate to one’s own environment and financial plan.

Student-faculty engagement is already present on campuses in the form of classroom instruction and academic advising. However, revised, enhanced and improved student-faculty engagement is needed for African American males, who may be sometimes hesitant to speak up and ask questions. Student-faculty engagement improvements such as trainings on intrusive advising and cultural awareness should take place at the perhaps already required faculty and staff professional development sessions and faculty meetings.

Mentoring is a low-cost opportunity for institutions to pair African American males with high achieving, supportive African American students, faculty or community members who desire to give back or need community service hours. Additionally, the addition of an African American male campus organization is an efficient way for African American males to offer support and encouragement and the institution to offer appreciation and acknowledgement of

cultural differences. The founding of an African American male student group could be as simple as garnering student signatures on a petition.

Lastly, most colleges likely possess academic support resources such as academic tutoring, writing assistance, test preparation and study seminars. To better staff and expand offerings and resources of existing academic support programs, institutions should pursue grant funding similar to the PBI grant offered through the U.S. Department of Education. Grant funds could provide colleges the opportunity to combine all of the abovementioned suggestions into one African American male support program that reaches African American males and engages them into a supportive campus environment that embraces their culture and encourages their success.

LIMITATIONS

There were limitations to consider concerning this study. When comparing CCSSE results of an institution that houses a minority male program, such as SCC, with a national sample of CCSSE results, the comparison could be misleading as both SCC and the national sample could have included both African American males who have participated in a minority program and those who have not. In addition, the national sample utilized in this study differed, as it was comprised of data from 2012, 2013, and 2014, unlike the survey data from SCC and ECC that was only from 2012. There were 5,398 national cohort survey respondents and 121 and 65 at SCC and ECC, respectively. This vast difference in representation is a concern for the validity of the comparison of survey results. Due to the possibility of survey respondents not being truthful in their responses, an inaccurate conclusion could have been drawn concerning if African American male students are more likely to be engaged and utilize student support resources when their institution offers a program specifically for African American male students.

Additionally, survey responses from Trailblazer participants concerning their campus engagement could not merely have been affected by participation in a minority male program, but their level of engagement could have also been impacted by student maturity and prior college experiences. This, too, could have led to an incorrect prediction.

There were also limitations to concluding if student engagement, as a part of a minority male student support program, affects the success of African American male college students.

When comparing the academic records of African American male Trailblazers participants with non-participants at SCC and ECC, the results could have been skewed based on there being a small number of students participating in the Trailblazers program compared to those not participating and the number of African American males attending ECC. Furthermore, if the composition of Trailblazers participants consisted of a large percentage of students who entered the institution as college-ready, the academic comparisons could have been misguided.

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MANUSCRIPT 2:
THE PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AT A
COMMUTER CAMPUS AT A TWO-YEAR INSTITUTION

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AT
A COMMUTER CAMPUS AT A TWO-YEAR INSTITUTION

INTRODUCTION

First-generation students (FGS) are a unique set of students on college campuses today. FGSs are colloquially referred to as first-gens (Hinz, 2016). Postsecondary institutions enrollment has declined in recent years and today's college student population is more diverse (Broido, 2004; Farber, 2016; Renn & Reason, 2013; Shang & Barkis, 2009). FGS are defined, for this study, as students whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Mitchell, 2008; Davis, 2010). According to a 2010 study by the U.S. Department of Education, an estimated 50% of the college population is comprised of people whose parents never attended college (NCES, 2012). Overall, FGS account for nearly 30% of entering freshman in college (Ramsey & Peale, 2010). Of this number, almost half of FGS students attend community college (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Mitchell, 2008).

One of the most important milestones in a student's life is being admitted to and enrolling in college. For first-generation students, enrolling in college can change their life trajectory and, at times, that of their family in general. First-generation college students have a variety of reasons for attending college including personal enhancement and obtaining job skills. Along with celebrating FGS success in college, we must also identify and attempt to address the challenges and barriers that many of these students often face during their collegiate experience. The value of a college degree is still very meaningful in the United States, including impacts on

employment and earnings. Eitel and Martin (2009) have discussed how a college education provides a lifetime passage for mobility for students.

Higher education yields benefits that are advantageous in many ways for FGS. The more educated society is, the greater advantages given to the surrounding community. Additionally, the more educated a society is, the more the government can increase revenues through taxes and fees; therefore, in return, the economy in the community increases (Arum & Roksa, 2011). In society, people typically link the value of a bachelor's degree to private economic gains (Ishitani, 2006). Shaw (2010) noted that individuals with a college degree can anticipate earning around 75 cents an hour more gross income over lifetimes in comparison to individuals without a college degree (as cited in Hensley, Galilee-Belfer, & Lee, 2013). On average, college graduates earn 65% more than graduates of high school during their working lives (Baum, Ma, & Payne, 2013). Two-thirds of adults, however, lack a college degree in America (Kahlenberg, 2016).

Students who are FGS often enroll in college with little to no knowledge of the collegiate process. They are often less prepared for college academically and encounter economic difficulties in paying for college (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke, 2011). FGS who enroll in college are less likely to complete an associate's degree or bachelor's degree (Smith, 2015). In conclusion, this study focused on first-generation college student perceptions and experiences at a community college.

ORGANIZATION OF STUDY

The organization of this individual manuscript is segmented into five sections. Section 1 introduces the problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, and definitions highlighting the study's relevant terms. Section 2 reviews literature relevant to the study the study with an emphasis on the background of community colleges, theoretical models related to student persistence, retention, and engagement, and a conceptual framework for first-generation college students. The methodology of data collection and analysis are outlined in Section 3. Section 4 presents the findings of the study. Section 5 provides the study's conclusions and offers insight into opportunities for further research.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A combination of factors may contribute to negatively impact students' motivation, persistence, and degree completion, including first-generation college students. According to multiple scholars, the following factors have been identified to affect enrollment, retention, and completion: financial concerns, deficiency in academic preparation, lack of academic integration and social belonging, lack of student commitment, and the absence of faculty and institutional support (Braxton, 2004; Byrd & McDonald, 2005; Enstrom & Tinto, 2008; Perna, 2000). The factors listed above by provide a call to action for college and university administrators to increase their efforts to not only attract first-generation students but to retain them as well.

Existing studies on first-generation students have focused on pre-college predictors of success, first-generation student characteristics, college access, and rates of attrition and persistence of traditional-aged college students (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2004). Increasing the persistence and graduation rates of first-generation students is an essential goal for those who work in higher education. Statistics indicate that between one-third to one-half of all students attending a community college anticipate completing a bachelor's degree within six years (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Marti, 2007; Provasnik & Planty, 2008).

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2016), nearly half of all undergraduates in the United States attend community colleges, and with good reason. Community colleges are open-access institutions that serve a diverse student population with diverse needs. Community colleges enroll a range of students from recent high school graduates

to adult learners, along with providing affordable and flexible enrollment options. Community colleges can help any person's educational and career goals within reach (AACC, 2016). Many first-generation college students enroll in community colleges for that reason.

Although community colleges are the bedrock of the post-secondary educational system, community colleges are expected to perform well with the fewest resources (American Association of Community College, 2011). Unfortunately, this state of affairs often leaves the enrolled first-generation college student with little assistance to navigate an unfamiliar educational arena. Community colleges, with limited resources, are integral to the collegiate success of many first-generation college students. As such, effective programming and policies are needed to support first-generation students at community college.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study seeks to contribute to the ways in which we can improve the retention and persistence of first-generation college students. The focus of this research is to better understand how to create equitable experiences at community college for first-generation students. Specifically, the study will examine the perceptions and experiences of first-generation students at a commuter campus at a two-year community college in rural Mississippi. The study will also assess whether students reported that their engagement with faculty and support services (advising, tutoring, financial aid, student counseling, etc) had a positive impact on their college experiences. As various definitions exist for first-generation status (Pike and Kuh, 2005), FGS are defined in the study as students with neither parent possessing a college degree.

Although overall access to college has expanded in recent decades, the opportunity to attend college for some stakeholders, such as FGS, can still be limited. Since the middle of the twentieth century, researchers have been examining the differences between first-generation students and non-FGS students (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Once enrolled, these students often face challenges related to retention and degree attainment (Hinz, 2016). Researchers have examined the barriers and pathways to success for first-generation students (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Nichols and Lucas (2010), for example, reported that first-generation students often lag behind in important indicators in comparison to continuing generation students (CGS), including retention rates, major selection, and credit hour enrollment, all of which affect first-generation students' ability to stay enrolled in college and to graduate (as cited in Wang, 2012).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were developed to address issues of transition for one group of first-generation students at a community college campus:

1. What perceptions did first-generation possess about attending college prior to enrollment?
2. What type of experiences have first-generation students encountered at the DeSoto Center at Northwest Mississippi Community College?
3. What type of engagement do FGS share in relation to faculty or staff that they perceive as having positively or negatively affected their college experience?

DELIMITATIONS

This is an exploratory qualitative study at one campus of a community college. The results may not be generalizable to other students at the institution or to other campus settings. Another limitation to the study to acknowledge is my role at the institution. My current position at this institution is within the administrative leadership. The lead author's personal perspective might influence the study by being an administrator. Students may feel obligated to mention only positive experiences on campus because of my role. My role could also affect the interpretation of data.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Below is a list of terms that will be used throughout the study.

- Attrition: "leaving higher education before achieving one's educational objectives" (Schuetz, 2008).
- Community College: "any institution regionally accredited to award the Associate of Arts or the Associate of Applied Science degree" (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).
- Continuing-Generation College Student: A student with at least one parent who holds a bachelor's degree.
- Cultural Capital: "the competence, proficiency, knowledge, and access to other advantages a person has to make the educational environment comfortable to easily succeed" (Oldfield, 2007).
- First-Generation College Student: "a student whose parents have not earned a four-year

college degree” (Davis, 2010).

- Low-Income: Students identified as low-income based on family incomes at 150% or less of the federal poverty levels (U.S. Department of Education, Federal Poverty Guidelines, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/incomelevels.html>).
- Non-Traditional Student in Community Colleges: Defined typically by age, specifically students who are 25 years or older.
- Open Admissions: “Students are able to enroll in college based on whether they have completed high school requirements or high school equivalency requirements.
- Persistence: Interchangeably used with the term “retention”; also explains students who are continuously enrolled from one semester to the next within the same college or university (Geisler, 2007).
- Retention: Defined as “student attainment of academic and personal goals, regardless of how many terms a student is at the college” (Seidman, 2005).
- Student Engagement/Involvement: The amount of energy (physical and psychological) that the student allocates to the academic experience (Seidman, 2005).
- Traditional Students: Defined as a student being under the age of 25 at the time of entering college (Kim, Sak, Lee, & Hagedorn, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:

BACKGROUND OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Community colleges are often viewed as institutions of higher education that provide opportunity to those who have often experienced hardship (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Open Admissions is the process of students being able to enroll in college based on whether they have completed high school requirements or high school equivalency requirements. Community colleges make access to college available for individuals who otherwise would not have an opportunity to attend college. College is accessible because community colleges have an *Open Admissions* policy allowing more individuals a chance to enroll in college; yet, some students are academically unprepared (Provasnik & Planty, 2008). While seeking to further the intent of creating opportunities for all, an *Open Admissions* process may be complicating the goal of degree completion for some students (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Therefore, the importance of support services being available in community colleges is vital, including, and perhaps often especially, for first-generation students. The *Open Admissions* policy is an opportunity for community college to support the democratizing of opportunities for people from low-income backgrounds (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Provasnik & Planty, 2008).

Some of the strengths of community colleges include their lower-cost, affordable tuition, open-door admissions, locations within the community, and provision of career-technical and vocational training. Community colleges are also often responsive to developing and offering majors needed in their community based on local businesses and industry. An important strength

of community colleges is the significantly lower cost of tuition in comparison to a four-year college or university. This is valuable to all students but especially low-income students, which encompasses many first-generation students.

Diverse academic offerings afford community college students the option to earn a certificate (completed 8 weeks, 16 weeks, or 1 year), an associate's degree (2 years), or take prerequisites for transfer to a four-year university. The location of community colleges often proves attractive to first-generation students because of time considerations. Students are usually able to travel to college within a 15-mile radius. Community colleges assist academically underprepared students overcome their academic barriers and succeed by returning them to their local communities trained with employable skills (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

While most attention community colleges receive is usually positive, there are some harsh critics of community colleges. Some of the criticisms include, but are not limited to, the unending gap between “the have and the have nots,” “watering down the curriculum,” and “teaching practical instead of educational skills” (Arum & Roksa, 2011). One of the most prominent critiques deals with attrition at community colleges. Statistics indicate that between one-third to one-half of all students who attend a community college intend to complete a bachelor's degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Mitchell 2008). However, only 22% of these students will transfer to a four-year institution, of which 34-45% will have earned an associate's degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Research studies have shown that high attrition rates at community colleges have been partially credited to the financial burden by students when paying for college without financial aid assistance (Dowd & Coury, 2006). Other statistics show that 62% of community college students attend part-time, making them less likely to graduate with an associate degree (Handel, 2009).

Community colleges have difficulty retaining students and graduating students with a two-year degree. Most students transfer to a four-year institution. Goldrick-Rab (2010) indicated “after six years being in college, only one-third of community college students completed a credential” (p.437). Specifically, Goldrick-Rab (2010) found that after three years, 16% of community college students with the intention of transferring to a four-year college had only gained a certificate or degree. Yet, at six years, only 36% had earned a certificate or associate’s degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). These same statistics were announced in Former President Obama’s American Graduation Initiative, in his 2009 speech. Former President Obama stated “Nearly half of students who enter community colleges intending to earn a degree or transfer to a four-year college fail to reach their goal within six years (Obama, 2009). Such retention concerns have highlighted the need for research studies focusing on how to better retain college students across the postsecondary education continuum. Retention and degree completion will remain in the spotlight into the foreseeable future as colleges seek new strategies to increase retention and graduation rates, with such efforts especially relevant for first-generation college students.

THEORETICAL MODELS OF STUDENT PERSISTENCE, INVOLVEMENT, & ENGAGEMENT

This section includes relevant literature regarding theoretical models and theories related to student persistence and engagement, including Astin’s involvement theory, Tinto’s integration theory, and the importance of first-generation student expectations. The review of literature exposes how this research contributes to the current knowledge on first-generation student perceptions, experiences, and student-faculty experiences.

STUDENT PERSISTENCE

A concern for most higher education researchers and administrators has been the ability for students to graduate college. Tinto (2006) recommended that one population of college students will be increasingly at-risk is “academically under-prepared low-income students”. This is very important because many first-generation students fall within the threshold of lower income levels and are academically under-prepared and underserved. Although access to college for students has increased, student populations are more diverse, the risks of non-completion in relation to persistence and engagement for this group of students have also increased. Kuh (2008) suggested how research on student engagement and persistence impacts not only current literature but, more importantly, it informs stakeholders such as administrators, faculty, and staff on how to promote student persistence. While there is much research available, it is often not being utilized by the very individuals who work with student daily (faculty, staff, & administrators) in order to encourage students to become and stay engaged with their institutions (Kuh, 2008).

ASTIN’S THEORY OF INVOLVEMENT

Alexander Astin developed one of the initial models related to students and their interaction in the collegiate environment. He introduces a theory of involvement because he argued that students learn best by becoming actively involved on campus. Therefore, Astin’s (1984) study focused on a strong connection between student involvement and student development. Student involvement as defined by Astin is the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1999). Astin believed that the level of quality and quantity of student involvement reduced the likelihood of college drop-out. Involvement is the behavior, not the student’s feelings or thoughts (Koopman, 2014). Related to this study, first-generation students need some type of engagement on campus

or with campus leaders to achieve success while enrolled in college. Astin's (1984) theory of involvement contained five basic postulates:

- Involvement involves the investment of physical and psychological energy in objects, (for example, activities, tasks, people)
- Involvement is based on a continuum – meaning different students will invest various amounts of energy on different objects at different times
- Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features, (e.g., how many hours students spend studying versus whether the student actually reviews the information and comprehends the assignments)
- The amount of personal development and student learning is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement
- The effectiveness of any policy or program is related to the capacity of increasing student involvement (Astin, 1999, p. 519)

Under Astin's model, student's goals and interests, in addition to their other academic and personal commitments, will determine how much energy the students will invest in academic relationships and activities.

TINTO'S MODEL OF STUDENT DEPARTURE

Tinto (1975) identified reasons why students dropped out of college and created one of the first theoretical models for student persistence. One of the most well-known theories of student persistence is Tinto's model of student departure (1975, 1987, 1993), founded on the principles of Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide. Tinto's theory focused on the idea that students have various family, social, and academic attributes, which affects their decision to stay

enrolled in college. Students enter college with various characteristics, family background, academic skills, and goal commitments. The two primary components of Tinto's model are academic and social integration.

ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Integration is the process by which an individual incorporates the values of the environment to become a member of a community (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Tinto emphasized that the interaction between the collegiate environment and the student leads to student departure. If students feel supported and encouraged, the likelihood of the student continuing their education is increased. Conversely, if students are not engaged or connected to the institution, the student is less likely to persist (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, it is important for institutions to create meaningful relationships with students which leads to social integration for students. The absence of academic and social integration for a student is likely to encourage the student to withdraw from the college (Tinto, 1975). Tinto also argued that if students separated themselves from family members and friends, students would stay enrolled in college (Tinto, 1993). In Tinto's (1993) book, *Completing College: Rethinking Institutional Action*, he encourages colleges and universities to rethink their role with increasing student success programming to assist with retention efforts.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Kuh (2009) defined engagement as the amount of time and effort that students place in their involvement in educational institutions that promote their learning and development. Engagement is two-fold; what the institution does and what the student does. Engagement is

about two parties who enter into an agreement about the educational experience (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Since this study focuses on actual college experiences, to understand the importance of student perceptions, experiences, and interactions with faculty and staff, it is critical to understand the literature regarding student engagement. Student engagement research suggests that the first year of college is one of the most important facets of student engagement, success, and persistence (Kuh, 2005). The components of a successful first year includes the interaction between faculty and staff within the classroom as well as outside of the classroom, increasing student involvement on campus, increasing academic expectations and levels of engagement (Barefoot, 2000). Like most persistence and retention research, it is not uncommon for practitioners and researchers to confuse the meaning of engagement and involvement.

An integral part of engagement is that it defers a greater responsibility to institutions in facilitating student success. For example, programs focused on retention at colleges and universities have increased worldwide; however, those programs typically lack the necessary goal of engaging and retaining first-generation, non-traditional, commuter students.

SENSE OF BELONGING

Research on the construct of sense of belonging within higher education has been studied minimally and only focused on traditional aged, four-year university students. Sense of belonging is defined as an individual's sense of identification to a group within or to the college community that may yield positive and negative responses (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). While sense of belonging could be applicable to many facets of life, in an academic environment, the connection is very practical. The correlation is that students better adjust academically and

socially if they feel a sense of belonging which will help their academic performance (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Therefore, interactions with peers, faculty, and staff, involvement in activities on campus, and classroom engagement all contribute to a students' sense of belonging. Students' academic and social involvement is critical to their persistence (Astin, 1984).

Students who perceived their academic and social interactions to be positive during their first semester of enrollment were more likely to enroll in a second semester (Heaney & Fisher, 2011). The more involved an academic community (engagement with faculty and staff members) increases a greater sense of belonging for students which increases the likelihood of the student continuing their postsecondary education. Pascarella and Terezini (1991) argued that belonging socially in an academic setting is important, but the sense of belonging academically is just as important.

The strongest relationship on a college campus may occur between faculty and students within the classroom. The faculty-student relationship impacts students' persistence and academic success (Wood & Turner, 2011). Classroom interaction with faculty and peers is vital to gaining the full advantage of the learning environment (Tinto, 1997). Students who perform poorly academically may feel uncomfortable asking questions or responding to questions in class with those students who perform well. Therefore, Engstrom and Tinto (2008) suggested institutions create programs and safe places for students to learn, to talk, and express themselves and learn from one another.

MATTERING

Mattering, like sense of belonging, is part of the umbrella effect in how students feel in relation to higher education (France, 2011). In the context of higher education, practitioners and

researchers promote the impact and value of mattering on college student success and retention (Schlossberg, 1989). Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) defined mattering as the external validation of an individual by others both at the interpersonal and societal level. The interpersonal form of mattering is in relation to other in our lives or within our inner circle, for example, parents, siblings, and friends. The societal level form of mattering is our relation to social institutions such as church, community, government, and university.

An important researcher that devoted a lot of her work to mattering and the college student has been Nancy Schlossberg. She was one of the first researchers to bring attention to college administrators and practitioners regarding the construct of mattering (Schlossberg, 1989). Her work stemmed from her experience from working with adults in transition. Schlossberg expanded the work of Rosenberg and McCullough through the use of interviewing adult students over the age of 25. In her work, she noted that when students perceive they do not matter to their colleges or universities, they will feel marginalized or as an outlier to the campus community. Schlossberg further explained that this would be the case for students undergoing transitions, from one role to another, such as students who are just entering college, or students who are returning to college. According to Schlossberg, mattering has the ability to influence how and to what degree students become involved and engaged within their collegiate environment, and she asserted that students from different backgrounds, gender, and roles, would likely experience sense of mattering differently.

Laura Rendon, another researcher in the field of mattering and belonging, introduced her theory of validation to higher education in 1994 (Rendon, 1994). Rendon believed that if someone at the college took an active interest in working with marginalized students that encouraged students when they needed, affirmed that the student was doing well in their

academic work, and supported them, which would lead to the student being successful in college (Rendon, 1994, p.44).

While Rendon's work does not acknowledge the work of Schlossberg, there are close parallels in both of their works. They both believed that mattering and validation influence college student engagement and involvement, students who have trouble connecting to college (especially non-traditional, first-generation college students), or the fact that colleges and universities should have interventions in place to foster an environment of mattering which can greatly impact student success. Current researchers in the field such as Linares and Munoz (2011) acknowledged that Schlossberg's mattering and marginality theory closely relates to validation theory and the need for "caring, feeling needed, attention, appreciation, and identifying with others" (p.23).

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

Extensive research exists focused on FGS access to college, but most literature does not consider that although access has increased degree attainment has not (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Additionally, most of these "at-risk" students start at a community college, which indicates an increased chance that these FGS will not graduate with a four-year degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The literature focused on FGS has evolved as the number of FGS entering post-secondary education has increased over time. Many pioneer researchers originally studied FGS by using quantitative methods and primarily focused on college access, student retention, and attrition (Billson & Terry, 1982; Ishitani, 2003; Tinto, 1993). However, more recent studies have expanded parameters in reviewing FGS in other areas of higher education including student affairs, counseling, and academic affairs (Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012). Furthermore, researchers studying FGS have turned to qualitative methodologies to explore students' lived

experiences, family roles, and student success (Jehangir, 2010; Kirshner, Saldivar, & Tracy, 2011). In this review of literature, I will explain general information regarding FGS by discussing and defining FGS, identifying some characteristics of FGS, and focusing on systematic challenges FGS face during their collegiate experience.

DEFINING FIRST GENERATION STUDENTS

A critical aspect of this study is defining a first-generation student as it will be used by the researchers. Defining FGS can be challenging (Allen, 2016). Authors have reported multiple definitions for this population (Davis, 2010; Walpole, 2007). Because multiple definitions of first-generation college students exist to define a “first-generation” student, I will provide some examples of definitions. Definitions of FGS reported by researchers and practitioners have been largely centered around FGS parents’ education. Thus, the parents’ level of education (e.g. completion of high school, community college, etc) and/or whether the parents graduated defined whether students qualified as FGS. In most research studies, FGS are defined as an individual whose parents have not completed a college degree (Petty, 2014).

Historically, the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 played an important role in making college more accessible for first generation students (Tate, Williams III, & Harden, 2012). President Lyndon Johnson and Congress enacted the Higher Education Act to promote and increase opportunities for low income families through scholarships, work-study programs, and federal loan guarantees (Strach, 2009). Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora (1996) reported the passage of the HEA made college more accessible, affordable, and created a space for underrepresented student populations. The Higher Education Opportunity Act (Public Law 110-315) (HEOA) was enacted on August 14, 2008, and it reauthorizes the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The act has defined a FGS as:

An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree or in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree. (Higher Education Act of 1965 as amended through 2009, Sec. 402Ah.).

The HEA definition of FGS has allowed students whose parent(s) graduated with an associate's degree or with a certificate or technical degree from a community college to qualify as FGS. Furthermore, many researchers and practitioners have utilized this definition of FGS (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

A majority of previous FGS research defined a FGS as one whose parents have earned a high school diploma or less (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001). An initial definition was explored in Billson and Terry's (1982) study and described first generation as students whose parents had no college experience. In a statistical analysis by the National Center for Education Statistics, FGS was defined as an individual whose parents never enrolled in a postsecondary institution (NCES, 2005). Cushman (2007) defined FGS as students who were "the first in their families to attend a four-year college" (p. 44). Mehta et al. (2011) defined a FGS as a person who comes from a family where neither parent or guardian graduated from college. Other groups have classified or referred to first-generation students as students whose parents completed at most a high school education even though one or both parents may have obtained some college education after high school (Hutchens, Deffendall, & Peabody, 2011). The differences in definitions for FGS can complicate research because of the intersection between parental education, low-income backgrounds, and parents' occupations. Some research focuses on students from low-income

families only, while other researchers focus on low income, first generation students from working-class families (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

The definition of “first-generation” student used for this study will define FGS as an individual where neither custodial parent/guardian completed a bachelor’s degree at a post-secondary institution. I selected this definition of FGS because it would allow flexibility when selecting participants for this exploratory qualitative study. This definition allowed the parents of a participants to hold a certificate and/or associate’s degree and still be identified as FGS.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF FGS

FGS are one of the most underserved groups of students on today’s college campuses. In 2001, approximately one-third of college students entering college were first-generation students (Choy, 2001). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 34% of undergraduates were the first to go to college in their families in the 2011-2012 academic year. Furthermore, an additional 28 percent of undergraduate students had parents with at least some collegiate experience but not a bachelor’s degree (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). FGS represent another population increasing in postsecondary attendance (Choy, 2001; Davis, 2010). FGS are considered another minority population within some environments (Hinz, 2016).

Demographically, students who are considered FGS are more likely to be women, students of color, and older than 24 (Choy, 2001; Terenzini, 1996). Some first-generation students also are categorized as low-income students because of their socioeconomic background. Atherton (2014) found that first-generation students usually come from homes with

fewer resources based on socioeconomic status. They are also more than likely to have people whom are dependents as compared to non-FGS (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Many FGS students attend college with the aspirations of completing a degree, finding gainful employment, and giving back to their communities. FGS are more apt to be a full-time employee while enrolled and take part-time classes while entering and re-entering college (Engle et al. 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008, Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Students who are undocumented and immigrated to the United States and who speak English as their second language have also been identified as more likely to be FGS (Baum & Flores, 2011; Rodriquez & Cruz, 2009). Additionally, English is not a first language for nearly 20 percent of first-generation students (Cardoza, 2016).

CHALLENGES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF FGS

Some FGS share common background characteristics and experiences before college. Petty (2014) addressed how first-generation students are faced with a plethora of challenges and disadvantages that can cause problems in achieving academic success and completing college degrees. FGS students often arrive at college less academically prepared than their non-FGS peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Davis, 2010). Many will require more developmental coursework and lack time management and organizational skills. They are also more likely to be enrolled in developmental education (English and Math) and less academically challenging classes (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). FGS also often complete fewer credit hours as well as earn lower GPAs after their first year in college (Chen, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004). These factors do not indicate that FGS are less intelligent or capable than their peers, but it does show that they may face additional challenges and need additional support in their collegiate journey. Research indicates that FGS mostly attend less selective four-year institutions and community colleges

(Engle & Tinto, 2008; Rine & Eliason, 2015). Some FGS start college with lower GPAs from high school, ACT/SAT scores, and less developed critical thinking skills (Davis, 2010; Mitchell, 2008).

FGS undergo some of the same challenges and obstacles of continuing generation students; yet, this research shows that they often have their own distinct struggles. FGS face challenges which include but are not limited to academic, social, cultural, and financial. FGS generally are more lacking in the knowledge to engage in social and academic experiences that are associated with college success compared to peers. Activities such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students and participating in extracurricular activities are not familiar. These factors may place FGS at a disadvantage when entering college compared to non-FGS peers (Choy, 2001, Ishitani, 2003).

FGS also tend to have more non-academic demands than their peers. Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) revealed most first-generation students are typically employed, work increased hours on their jobs, earn a lower family income, and provide support for several dependents. Their challenges range from a lack of financial resources to a lack of familial support. They are also more likely to receive less encouragement to attend college (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Additionally, their self-efficacy and critical thinking scores, in addition to their confidence in their own abilities in the collegiate environment, are often reported as lower (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Davis, 2010). First-generation students are four times more likely to leave higher education institutions (HEI) without completing a degree when compared to their peers (Tinto, 2008). Research indicated that 89% of low income first generation college students leave college within six years without completing a degree (Ramsey & Peale, 2010).

LOW INCOME FGS

Financial concerns also remain a very real problem for some FGS. Corrigan (2003) defined low income students as someone whose family does not exceed 150% of the poverty level. FGS are more than likely to be from low-income families (Corrigan, 2003). Corrigan (2003) reported four factors that negatively influenced retention and persistence rates of low income students: employed full time, attending college as a part time student, not having a traditional high school diploma, and being a non-traditional student.

Attrition for low income, FGS students are higher than middle and upper-class families (Ishitani, 2003). Although it may be difficult for institutions to intervene and fix financial issues, the problems must be addressed or somewhat alleviated to facilitate meaningful learning experiences for FGS. For some FGSs, an initial financial barrier begins with deciding whether they should spend fifty dollars on an undergraduate application for admission or use the same fifty dollars for groceries or gas for a week's transportation. Students rely on higher education as a means to increase work opportunities and salary options. FGSs are interested in attending college to make more money to help their families.

Thus, FGS are interested in attending college to gain employment opportunities that will enhance their financial status and, often, that of their family. In seeking to achieve this goal, many FGS are susceptible to financial stress that can deter retention and degree completion (Eitel & Martin, 2009). Students will often take a full load of academic classes as well as work a full-time job to make ends meet. FGS are forced to take out additional student loans to reduce debt already accrued unconnected to college (Eitel & Martin, 2009). Some lowincome college students come from being raised in an environment of generational poverty. Some students are taught at an early age that they will not be successful and often drop out of high school because

of it. Therefore, when first generation students from unprivileged backgrounds defeat the odds and are accepted into college, they may face challenges not encountered by their continuing generation student peers.

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT FOR FGS

FGS enter college with a view that can be distinct from their previous experiences or those of their family (Cushman, 2006, Davis, 2010, Oldfield, 2007). For some students, college culture is vastly different from their culture at home (Cushman, 2006, Oldfield, 2007). FGS are sometimes at a disadvantage compared to their non-FGS peers because of the deficit in social and cultural capital transmitted through generations (Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012). FGS students may struggle to familiarize themselves with culture on campus and the hidden rules of how institutions operate, which may leave them feeling isolated and marginalized (Cushman, 2006; Oldfield, 2007). These feelings of isolation and invisibility in the classroom may further marginalize students on campus. Unfortunately, some first-generation students are forced to decide between being loyal to their families or choosing to follow their aspirations (Hinz, 2016).

Yet, cultural capital could help FGS succeed through the acquirement of social capital that can be gained through peer interaction, academic and social engagement, and co-curricular activities (Pascarella, 2004). Cultural capital can be defined as the degree of ease and familiarity that one has with the dominant culture of a society (Bills, 2003). Cultural capital may also be defined as the competence, proficiency, knowledge, and access to other advantages a person has to make the educational environment comfortable to easily succeed (Oldfield, 2007). For many working class first-generation students, the concept of cultural capital, or at least an

understanding of unwritten rules, is important to learn about when entering college (Hinz, 2016).

FGS are more likely to be less prepared to make informed decisions about college that could maximize their educational developments and benefits (Pascarella, 2004). For students whose parents did not go to college, there can be very limited access to college information. FGS often come to campus less prepared to handle college because of the lack of cultural capital, making it difficult for them to graduate (Mitchell, 2008). First-generation students are not privy to information because they are typically the first student in their immediate or extended families to attend college. For example, some low-income families are aware of federal Pell grants but often they do not realize that the cost of tuition, fees, and textbooks may not be covered with the amount awarded. It is often easier for continuing generation students (CGS), often with the support of family members, to be able to take care of financial matters with the bursar's office, or to ask for additional scholarship monies from various offices on campus, or where to find work study positions because they have access to their parents and siblings to answer questions about college life.

FGS not only lack academic and social skills they also encounter barriers in adapting to their new culture on campus. Davis (2010) mentioned the need of FGS understanding hidden rules, needing to learn practical skills, speaking correct grammar, and study skills. FGS may feel like outsiders because of socioeconomic differences as well as social styles and speech patterns (Cushman, 2006, Oldfield, 2007). One student explained in a study by Orbe (2004) how they changed the way they talked to fit in. Another student stated, "You don't do double negatives here" (Orbe, 2004). Some first-generation students struggle with the crossover process when entering college. Students often feel like outsiders because their family does not understand the

complexities they face (Lubrano, 2004, as cited in Hinz, 2016). Therefore, FGS may have a challenging transition to college life.

STRATEGIES FOR HELPING FGS

Much literature involving first-generation students primarily focuses on the challenges to their academic success. Macias (2013) explained the importance of higher educational professionals selecting success for first-generation students as a top priority. Atherton (2014) highlighted the effectiveness of academic preparedness differences among first-generation students and continuing generation students. If more first-generation students are prepared academically for college, their transition may be smoother. Higher education professionals and faculty members are on the front lines with college students. Faculty members empower students by holding high expectations for students, which produces creativity, positivity, and eagerness to perform well and which can be especially for first-generation students (Macias, 2013).

There are several strategies that higher education professionals should consider when working with FGS populations:

Mentoring. There is a gap of resources available to first-generation students and continuing generation students. Research indicates that “access without support is not opportunity,” meaning that just because students have access to college does not mean they will succeed without proper support (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Wang (2012) suggested the importance of mentoring relationships as a solution to narrowing this gap. Today, colleges and universities often have some level of expectation that most incoming students understand the college process. The ongoing perception of students being aware of the college process is perpetuated because

colleges and universities often operate on the assumption that most college students have parents who have previously attended college.

Colleges and universities should create peer mentoring support groups to help FGS transition to college. These students need to develop relationships with people on campus that they can trust. The student will need mentors who are familiar with the college environment to show them how to study, manage their time, budget their finances, balance their academic and social life, and work on their organizational management skills. Strong relationships and mentoring in college increased support for first-generation students with little to no support from family (Wang, 2012). Meanwhile, some FCSs survive without mentors and rely on their own personal strength and courage to succeed. In this way, first-generation students typically display high levels of self-esteem and internal locus of control (Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012).

Counseling. There is an increasing need for counseling for FGS transitioning to college. For many FGS, a familiar environment has been displaced and replaced by an environment that is unfamiliar, impersonal, and that may even be viewed as hostile. FGS students need emotional support, personal guidance, proper academic advice, and an academic support system to help them. As such, campus services, such as those provided through the student development center or counseling services, are places where FGS can seek support and affirmation.

Advising. Advising is a key component in assisting first-generation students with choosing a major and navigating college life. First-generation students may have difficulty selecting a major that aligns with their talents and interests. Students may be encouraged to select majors that families perceive to be in high paying fields (Snell, 2008). Many first-generation students disclose that they are unsure of their prospective field of work. Yet, first generation

students select fields in healthcare or a business-related area because of perceived career stability. Students often struggle between selecting a major that will make their family happy and selecting a degree in which they are most interested. Advisors who are knowledgeable regarding the particular challenges of FGS can play a helpful role in helping them transition to college and in the successful pursuit of a major that is appropriate for their career and life interests.

METHODS

The literature identified characteristics of FGS, highlighted the challenges that FGS face, and provided initial strategies to assist FGS. The purpose of this study was to identify precollege perceptions that FGS had before enrolling in college. Additionally, a goal was to explore the perceptions of FGS at a two-year rural community college, as well as examine how these students perceive engagement with faculty and staff. Learning from currently enrolled FGS will provide the institution with information to help assist incoming FGS with programming to enhance their collegiate experience to help them succeed on their chosen post-secondary journey, which may include matriculation and graduation from a four-year institution. This study will contribute in general of community colleges seeking to enhance their support services and faculty/student engagement for FGS.

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What perceptions did first-generation students possess about attending college, prior to enrollment?
2. What type of experiences have first-generation students encountered at the DeSoto Center at Northwest Mississippi Community College?
3. What type of engagement do FGS share in relation to faculty or staff that they perceive as having positively or negatively affected their college experience?

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research methodologies include quantitative and qualitative, or a combination of the two called mixed methods (Cresswell, 2009). Qualitative methodology creates a platform for voices often marginalized in research. For this research study, a qualitative research approach allowed the opportunity to focus on individuals and their perceptions and experiences. Moreover, qualitative research utilized an intuitive process that builds patterns, categories, and themes as the data continues to emerge (Cresswell, 2009). This method was selected as an opportunity to present participants' voices, visualize and create a detailed picture of the issue, and make a call for change in higher education (Cresswell, 2013).

Qualitative research is quite interpretive by nature. Based on this interpretive nature, the researcher biases, judgment, and values are explained stated in the research product (Cresswell, 1994). The University of Mississippi's IRB requires doctoral students completing their dissertations to complete certification in the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI PROGRAM). The researcher completed the certification and the certificate was sent to the dissertation advisor for verification of completion.

Specifically, the study relied on semi-structured, open-ended interview questions to permit students the freedom to voice their thoughts. The interview protocol and consent letters used in recruitment, are available for review as an appendix. Additionally, the lead author observed and created field notes to keep an accurate record of my thoughts as a researcher thus far in the process.

The lead researcher utilized in-depth interviews for this study. Before starting the interviews, the lead author provided all participants with an information sheet which disclosed risks and benefits for participants (see Appendix E). The lead author clearly explained the study,

what would be asked of them, and asked questions to ensure their understanding, and obtained their signatures and consent (see Appendix E). All interviews were audio-recorded.

The lead author protected participants by keeping data confidential and secure. To maintain confidentiality, a pseudonym was assigned to each participant. When the lead author transcribed interviews, a pseudonym was not used originally. After careful consideration of anonymity, the decision was made to assign participant pseudonyms and replace their actual names. The lead author then used a transcription service, which immediately replaced actual names with pseudonyms and secured all documents in a locked file cabinet in my office. The lead author only has access to the file cabinet. All recordings are on a password protected computer which are also located on a password protected network to which only the lead author have access to.

PARTICIPANTS

Criterion sampling was used to ensure all participants qualified as FGS (Cresswell, 2013). Students were asked to self-identify as FGS by answering several questions. Since students could be somewhat confused about the meaning of first generation, the lead author explained the definition as it is described in this study. The definition of “first-generation” student used for this study defines FGS as an individual where neither custodial parent/guardian completed a bachelor’s degree at a post-secondary institution. This definition of FGS allows flexibility when selecting participants for this exploratory qualitative study. This definition allowed the parents of a participant to hold a certificate and/or associate’s degree or even to have some four-year college experience.

A letter was sent to the campus dean asking permission to send information to all students attending the Desoto Center campus of Northwest Mississippi Community College (see Appendix A). The flyer explained the study and the request for an interview with students who met the criteria as a FGS (see Appendix B). The lead author also provided my email address where students could contact me directly. Because of the lack of replies through email, permission was sought to speak to several classes on campus to solicit participants for the study. The lead author explained the study and provided prospective participants with more information about confidentiality, risk and benefits, and the option to remove themselves from the study at any time. Once students were verified as a FGS participant, students signed a form and left their contact information. The lead author contacted the students by phone to schedule an interview. If the lead author did not receive a response back, the lead author did not contact them again to avoid making students feel pressured to participate. The lead author also relied heavily on convenience and snowball sampling for this study because of the challenges in recruitment (Cresswell, 2013).

Participants represented various diverse backgrounds in relation to demographics. The lead author interviewed students who recently completed at least one semester of their freshman year on campus to understand their perceptions as a newly enrolled college student. The lead author wanted to know their precollege perceptions and their thoughts of how rigorous college would be as an FGS. The lead author also interviewed several freshman and sophomore students and one recent graduate. The lead author did not limit my sample by any factors such as socioeconomic status, age, or race/ethnicity.

RESEARCH SITE

The institution is a two-year commuter campus located in a rural Mississippi. The institution offers two main divisions: academic and career technical. The primary goal of the 2-year institution is to prepare students for the workforce through earning a certificate or an associate's degree or transfer to a four-year college or university. A majority of FGS enroll in public two-year or four-year institutions of higher education (Rine & Eliason, 2015). Academic students have the option to complete coursework and transfer to a four-year institution or graduate with an associate's degree. Some career-technical programs offer career certificate options, such as commercial truck driving, healthcare assistant, EMT-basic, and practical nursing, which are available for 8 weeks, 16 weeks, and 1-year degree programs to train students for the workforce.

Most students attending the commuter campus of the research site are non-traditional, full-time students, as well as students who work part-time and attend college full-time. The goal is to better understand the experience of first-generation students attending this campus. Ultimately, it is intended that lessons learned from this study can be applied to enhance the experience and success of FGS.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collected in this study will be used to increase retention and persistence efforts at a two-year commuter campus at a local community college in rural Mississippi. Data that is rich in description characterizes qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklan, 2007).

The study is an exploratory qualitative examination, consisting of interviews designed to yield the perceptions and experiences of FGS at a two-year institution. Appropriate materials were submitted to the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at the University of Mississippi and the

research site selected. First, the lead author submitted IRB materials to the University of Mississippi as a student researcher. As of January 26, 2017, the lead author received official notification of IRB Exempt Approval of 17x-140 from Jennifer Caldwell, Ph.D., Senior Research Compliance Specialist, Research Integrity and Compliance at the University of Mississippi (see Appendix G). After receiving IRB approval at the University of Mississippi, the lead author submitted an Application of Internal Research application to the selected research site to request permission to collect data at their educational institution. On February 6, 2017, the lead author received confirmation of approval from Carolyn Wiley to start research at the local community college (see Appendix G). The lead author sent both approvals through email to my dissertation advisor, Dr. Neal Hutchens.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format that allowed the researcher to focus on the interview while students freely spoke on information asked regarding their perceptions as first-generation college students. The conversational tone used by the researcher was conducive to engaging participants which yielded in capturing rich, descriptive data during the analysis process. Interviews were recorded with the Rev application on my phone as well as a digital recording device. After each interview, the lead author compiled observer comments to record my thoughts during the interview process. The lead author completed two interviews after the spring 2017 semester; however, a majority of the interviews were completed during the summer and fall 2017 semester. Approximately fifteen participants were selected for this study. All transcripts and recordings from this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of 3 years.

DATA ANALYSIS

At the conclusion of this study, fifteen participants were interviewed. Initially, the lead author transcribed a few interviews manually to be familiar with the data transcription process. After the second transcript, the lead author utilized a transcription service for the remaining interviews. Since this is a qualitative study, the lead researcher began the data analysis process through the use of coding. There is no one “right” way to analyze data and requires the researcher to be comfortable with developing categories and making comparisons in data analysis (Cresswell, 2013).

Saldana (2013) found coding is just one way of analyzing qualitative data, not the only way (p.2). Coding, as defined by Saldana, is a phrase or word which symbolically assigns a summative, evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data (Saldana, 2013, p.3). The data can consist of participant observation notes, interview transcripts, journals, photographs, literature, and so on.

The lead researcher in this study utilized solo and team coding. Solo coding is when the researcher works independently as a “lone ethnographer” (Saldana, 2013). Team coding is using multiple minds together to provide multiple ways of analyzing and interpreting data. Saldana (2013) asserted in most qualitative studies, coding is a solitary act; yet, some studies may involve a team. The lead researcher along with a three other members of the research team held data sessions to code, analyze, and interpret results. As discussed in Saldana (2013), a research team builds codes and coding builds a team through the creation of shared interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon being studied (p.34).

Analysis occurred in three phases. Interview transcripts were reviewed several times by lead author for recurring regularities (Merriam, 1998). The lead author highlighted similar phrases and quotes from interviews that were significant to the study. Analysis then proceeded

in a series of steps: open coding, axial coding, categories, and themes. Open coding consists of going back and forth through transcripts underlining and highlighting the same words and phrases. Axial coding consists of centralizing all of the open codes to a smaller number of codes to be specific. Categories consists of an overarching word to place all codes under. Finally, the lead author refined and integrated the categories until themes emerged. See Table 6. *Codes* below to review the open codes, axial codes, categories, and themes emerged.

Table 6. *Codes*

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Categories	Themes
Work Providing for family Jobs Money	Career Opportunities Advancement	Degree Driven Employment Opportunities	“It’s All About the Jobs”
Nervous Scared Younger people Being in classroom Time Management Adjustment Balance No time	Balance between family, work, and school	Interaction with peers Time Management	“Out of comfort zone”
Family Children Spouse Support	Strong familial support	Relationships	“Without support, there’s no way”
Learning Mentorship Doubt Intimidating	Not as bad as they thought	Academic rigor	“I want to do the best I can”
Tired Stressed Too much What was I thinking?	Too much work Not enough time	Challenges	“The Struggle is Real”
Friendly Supportive Always there Answer questions Positive	Faculty/Staff Support Great teachers Respected	R-E-S-P-E-C-T Support Where to go?	“Great experiences”
Not supportive Rude Not helpful	Felt disrespected	Support	“I got a little bit of push back”

ESTABLISHING TRUSTWORTHINESS AND VALIDITY

Cresswell (2013) concluded that validity in qualitative research is really focused on the credibility and trustworthiness of the researcher. The lead author went through two cycles of coding. The first cycle was to identify initial codes during the analysis of the participant interviews. During analysis, the lead author contacted participants as a means of member checking to validate the findings revealed. Triangulation of data is very important to the trustworthiness of qualitative research studies. The second cycle of coding was verified by the lead author along with other three members of the research team. The lead author served as the lead coder. The inter-coding team was utilized to triangulate the data. The lead author met with the research team to validate the themes emerged from their data analysis.

FINDINGS

The primary focus of this study was to explore first-generation college students' perceptions and experiences at a commuter campus at a community college. The primary research questions that directed this study were: 1. What perceptions did first-generation possess about attending college prior to enrollment? 2. What type of experiences have first-generation students encountered at the DeSoto Center at Northwest Mississippi Community College? 3. What type of engagement do FGS share in relation to faculty or staff that they perceive as having positively or negatively affected their college experience?

To provide answers to the research questions, the researcher conducted fifteen interviews with students of a two-year rural community college. Interviews for this study were completed in the spring, summer, and early fall 2017 academic semesters. Participants range from first semester freshmen to sophomore level students; one student was a recent graduate of the community college. Students who were interviewed were selected because neither custodial parent completed a bachelor's degree. Through analysis of the data, insight was provided into the various aspects of first-generation commuter college students. Most of the participants selected this community college because of its close access to their homes and low-cost, affordable tuition.

This section provides a brief overview and profile of the first-generation, commuter students and outlines participants' perceptions of their experiences prior to enrollment. The

emergence of themes through data analysis and factors contributing to the students' positive and/or negative experiences are discussed.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS

The results of this qualitative study are based on the interviews of fifteen college students enrolled at two-year institution in rural Mississippi. All students voluntarily participated in the study. Each participant was interviewed face to face. Recording and transcription of interviews was done through the Rev.com transcription service. Interviews were transcribed within a few days, after which participants were able to review, change, and/or verify their comments. All interviews were conducted during the months of May – September 2017. This section provides an overview of the demographics of participants in this study. Specifically, age, gender, race/ethnicity, classification, and enrollment status are presented in Table 1. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

Below the *Participant Demographics* (see Table 7) of participants in the study, the lead author provided a short background of each participant in the study. The individual background profiles were of importance because it provided the researcher the opportunity to provide additional supplemental information to the reader. The lead author identified the enrollment status of full-time and/or part-time of all participants. The lead researcher observed the level of difficulty in terms of number of credit hours attempted and whether enrollment status may have affected the participants' perceptions and college experiences. Nine participants were identified as full-time students (enrolled in 12 or more credit hours) and six participants were identified as part-time students (enrolled in at least 6-9 credit hours). The lead author also observed the category of freshmen/sophomore student status because the collegiate experiences of a entering first-time freshmen first-generation, commuter college student could vary in comparison to a

sophomore level student preparing for graduation and/or transfer to a four-year college or university.

Table 7. *Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Freshman/ Sophomore	Full- Time/ Part- Time	High School Completion
Angela	40	Female	Native American	Freshman	Full- Time	GED
Susan	43	Female	White	Freshman	Full- Time	Traditional High School Diploma
LaKeisha	30	Female	Black	Sophomore	Full- Time	Traditional High School Diploma
Tasha	39	Female	Black	Freshman	Full- Time	Traditional High School Diploma
Vivian	43	Female	Black	Freshman	Part- Time	Traditional High School Diploma
Molly	34	Female	Black	Sophomore	Full- Time	Traditional High School Diploma
Olivia	40	Female	Black	Sophomore	Part- Time	Traditional High School Diploma

Kurt	47	Male	Native American	Freshman	Part-Time	GED
John	55	Male	Black	Sophomore	Full-Time	Traditional High School Diploma
Michael	30	Male	Black	Sophomore	Full-Time	Traditional High School Diploma
Callie	43	Female	Hispanic	Sophomore	Full-Time	Traditional High School Diploma
Derek	46	Male	Black	Sophomore	Part-Time	Traditional High School Diploma
Arizona	37	Female	White	Freshman	Part-Time	Traditional High School Diploma
Meredith	41	Female	White	Freshman	Part-Time	GED
Webber	40	Male	Black	Freshman	Part-Time	GED

Angela. Angela is a 40-year old female freshman originally from Sacramento, CA majoring in Pre-Nursing. She is a mother of two children. Angela dropped out of school in the seventh grade. She did not go to high school. She received her GED at age 34 and received an adult scholarship based on her GED scores to attend the local two-year community college. Angela is a full-time employee and full-time student. She initially attended a local technical

college and received a certification in Medical Assisting but wanted to attend a community college for career stability.

Susan. Susan is a 43-year old female freshman originally from Plains, GA majoring in Pre-Nursing. She is a mother of two children. She graduated from high school. Susan did not have any pre-college perceptions. She originally was going to military but she became pregnant and her whole outlook changed. Susan became a mom and worked full-time. She entered college when her children became grown.

Lakeisha. LaKeisha is a 30-year old female sophomore originally from Grenada, MS majoring in Health Information Management. She is a mother of one child. She graduated from high school; yet, she was determined to attend a four-year university. She bought her own vehicle and then her mom became suddenly ill. So she moved back home to take care of her and became pregnant. She is a full-time mom and have a full-time job.

Tasha. Tasha is a freshman, mother of three children, originally from Chicago, IL majoring in Health Information Management. She is enrolled as a full-time student and works full-time. Tasha knew college would be kind of a struggle because she hadn't been to school in awhile. She had to get adjusted to being back in school and working with my kids. She wondered how she was going to be able to focus on the work and things like that.

Vivian. Vivian is a female freshman student majoring in Pre-Nursing from Marshall County, MS. She is a mother of grown and small children. She said she married her husband and they started all over. Vivian attributed her educational background, caring and nurturing to her grandmother. Vivian was raised in a home of five. Vivian shared that she and her siblings were

not exposed to a lot of education at that time. But she remembered her grandmother reading the Bible to her daily and she really encouraged Vivian.

Molly. Molly is a sophomore, female student originally from Memphis, TN majoring in Practical Nursing. Molly graduated from high school and moved to Michigan for about four years before returning back to the Mid-South. After completing the Practical Nursing program, Molly is interested in attending a four-year college or university.

Olivia. Olivia is a sophomore, female, full-time student majoring in Business Administration originally from Inverness, MS. She attending college a few years after high school but did complete. She worked full-time and focused on her career. She is really motivated to complete college this time.

Kurt. Kurt is a freshman male student attending college part-time majoring in Business Administration. He moved around a lot when he was younger and did not graduate from high school traditionally. Kurt completed his GED in 1995. Kurt decided to attend college for career advancement.

John. John is a sophomore male student majoring in Business Administration from Memphis, TN. He attends college full-time while maintaining a full-time job. John attended college originally right after completing high school but did not complete. Then, he went to the Navy.

Michael. Michael is a sophomore male student majoring in Funeral Service Technology from Memphis, TN. Michael already completed a bachelor's degree; however, but he is returning to obtain his funeral service license to practice in the field.

Callie. Callie, a female student originally from Mexico, is a recent graduate in Business Administration from the community. Callie's family immigrated to the United States when she was five years old. Callie always had a dream to finish college not only for herself but for her family. Callie did not think it would happen. Callie is the first person in her family to graduate from college.

Derek. Derek is a sophomore male student majoring in Business Administration originally from Jackson, MS. Derek knew that he needed to complete college for career mobility.

Arizona. Arizona is a freshman female student majoring in Psychology from Huber Springs, Arkansas. Arizona is currently employed in the gaming industry and is possibly looking for other career opportunities. Arizona is passionate about working with trauma patients because of some personal experiences. Arizona is enrolled in her first semester in college, part-time, and started in developmental education classes specifically in English and Math. \

Meredith. Meredith, an entering female freshman student, working full-time, majoring in Nursing from Horn Lake, MS. Meredith dropped out of high school and received her GED last year. She applied to the local community college and was accepted. She was excited to start college.

Webber. Webber, a freshman male student, majoring in Medical Research. Webber is attending college after recently completing his GED. He experienced two great losses in his life, his mother and grandmother, while working towards his GED. He continued to push and be motivated to complete his GED. After being asked about his initial thoughts of college, Webber indicated that he was terrified.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three research questions guided this study:

1. What perceptions did first-generation possess about attending college prior to enrollment?
2. What type of experiences have first-generation students encountered at the DeSoto Center at Northwest Mississippi Community College?
3. What type of engagement do FGS share in relation to faculty or staff that they perceive as having positively or negatively affected their college experience?

RESULTS

Transcripts from interviews and researcher notes were used to inform this study. Through the process of member checking, an electronic copy of transcribed interviews was sent to each study participant. Through interviews with first generation college students, 5 themes emerged to be common in their experiences in the rural community college environment. Addressing the first research question of what perceptions did first-generation possess about attending college prior to enrollment, two themes emerged: 1) it's all about the jobs, and 2) out of comfort zone.

Addressing the second research question of what type of experiences have first-generation students encountered at the DeSoto Center at Northwest Mississippi Community College, three themes emerged: 1) without support, there's no way, 2) I want to do the best I can, and 3) the struggle is real.

Addressing the third research question of what type of engagement do FGS share in relation to faculty or staff that they perceive as having positively or negatively affected their college experience, two themes emerged: 1) positive experiences, and 2) I got a little bit of push back.

Analysis related to research question one: PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE

Students believed regardless of the participants' individual backgrounds, each carried some idea of the importance of college and some possessed an outlook on what college life

would entail. In exploring the factors that first-generation, non-traditional college students attending a two year institution perceived motivations relating to college, two themes emerged. The themes are *“it’s all about the jobs”, and “out of comfort zone”*.

“It’s all about the jobs”

Jobs. Jobs. Jobs. What can I do to find a better paying job? What do I need to get a better job? These are just a few examples of the questions students ponder when thinking about enrolling in college. Employment opportunities is one of the most important reasons why students are currently motivated to attend college.

Participants in the study revealed that they attended a local community college in rural Mississippi to start a new career path and to earn a credential for more employment opportunities. Some students were struggling to obtain more financial opportunities because they did not have an associate’s degree. Multiple participants discussed the motivation to attend college came from a focus on career advancement.

Kurt, for example, was very upfront about his motivations for attending college. He needed to attend college for career advancement. He has worked with his company for over 20 years and now has an opportunity to move into management. They are ready to offer him the position as soon as he acquires his associate’s degree. He is excited to be in college as well as receiving his much deserved promotion and benefits.

Lakeisha, another participant shared her eagerness of going to college to change career fields. Lakeisha currently work in education but is interested in working in the medical field. Lakeisha shared,

I have a full-time job and I work with special needs kids. I am currently a special education teacher. I work with 13 different personalities and behaviors every day. I have changed my major to Health Information Management. I want to do something different.

Olivia returned to college to finish what she started years ago. Olivia is majoring Business Administration. Olivia currently owns several businesses. She has a real estate broker license as well as own investment properties, manage those, and she have a trucking company. Olivia purported,

I am basically finishing what I started before. I have always wanted to finish college. You never know where this will lead to. I am currently self-employed. I don't have a retirement. I need a job with retirement benefits.

Tasha returned to college because of career opportunities. Tasha is a mother of three. She talked about her children in the interview and she really expressed the importance of coming to college. Tasha needed a better education so she could get a better job. Tasha currently drives sixty-plus miles one way for her job. She works for the Sanitation department. She rides the back of a garbage truck all day. Tasha said: I know I need to get a better education so I can get a better job. I really want to be there for my kids like I really want to.

Angela initially attended a local technical college and received a certification in Medical Assisting but wanted to attend a community college for career stability. Angela affirmed,

You know working just simple jobs wasn't getting all of the bills paid. I have a good job. I get paid well. I get paid enough to pay the bills and still have something left over. This is something that I want. I want to be higher in my career. I had to do something because my kids were still dependent on me being home.

Another participant, Derek, knew that he needed to complete an associate's degree for career mobility. He was confident from the start that he is going to complete his degree. Derek indicated: I can do two years. Get my associates and if I like it, I can do two more years and get my BA. My only thought about college is school is school. No matter where you go, I just knew, in order to get the job that I wanted, I had to go to college.

After reviewing transcripts, this was a sentiment echoed by other participants. Students were motivated to return to college for the hopes of increasing their chances of receiving a promotion or better employment opportunities.

Summary/Discussion

The first theme, *It's all about the jobs*, discussed participants' motivation for pursuing a college degree. Majority of the participants stated they needed better employment opportunities leading to career stability and mobility so they could continue providing for their families. This theme correlates with current literature because most FGS students attend college with the intention of completing a degree, obtaining employment, and hope to give back to their communities. Engle et al. (2006) found FGS are more likely to be full-time employees while enrolled in part-time classes. Additionally, FGS attend college to gain skills to utilize in the workforce, gain employment opportunities that will also increase their financial status (Eitel & Martin, 2009). Most of the participants enrolled in college to pursue education in hopes of acquiring a career to provide stability and increase household earnings for their families.

In conclusion, majority of the participants in the study expressed they were excited but nervous to begin their collegiate journey. Attending college was necessary to earn a credential in order to be eligible for promotions and other job opportunities. In the following theme, out of

comfort zone, participants described their initial reaction to being a first-time, first-generation college student.

“Out of comfort zone”

Most traditional college students have some exposure to college in high school. The participants in this study was non-traditional college students with little to no exposure to college. The participants discussed their feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and nervousness as a new college student. Participants was nervous being on campus and they also worried about what their other peers would think. Since all of the participants in the study are non-traditional, they were concerned with being the “oldest” (as defined by age) student in the classroom. They were concerned if they would have questions and need additional help and if it would be available.

Vivian, one of the participants shared her experience. She felt scared and out of place. She has been out of school for probably 25 years or so. She said, I haven’t been in a school since high school. I’ve never been in an actual college, college. I felt out of my comfort zone.

Additionally, other participants felt the same feelings of apprehension. Olivia worked full-time after high school and focused her time primarily on her career. She is really motivated to complete college this time. Olivia stated her perception to starting back college was:

We’re all here for the same reason. I remember feeling like I’m way older than these kids. I was intimidated but now I keep telling myself that we are all here for the same thing. That is my motivation now to finish and I’m more comfortable now being in school because of that.

Another participant, Meredith, dropped out of high school and received her GED last year in 2017. She applied to the local community college and was accepted. She was excited to

start college. When the lead author asked about her initial thoughts of college, Meredith expressed,

I was nervous. Extremely nervous, especially after being out of school for over 22 years.

I just didn't know what to expect. I thought college was a young thing and that I would be completely out of place, but I found out that it's nothing like that.

As participants began their new collegiate experience, it became very clear that some were not prepared for college. The lead author had an opportunity to hear from several participants their excitement about starting a legacy for their families, but was exposed to several participants' feelings of uneasiness, and lack of knowledge about college procedures.

The lead author wanted to share Callie's story of overcoming adversity and the determination required to apply for college. Callie's family immigrated to the United States when she was five years old. Callie always had a dream to finish college not only for herself but for her family. Callie did not think it would happen. Callie is the first person in her family to graduate from college. When Callie recalled her initial thoughts and perceptions of college, Callie shared,

I knew it was going to be hard. There was no way I could work part-time. There was no way I could take that school time and not be able to be family oriented because my family came first. My boss built me up in a way that is almost indescribable. I didn't think I was going to make it. I didn't see myself graduating. I knew I wanted to get some type of education.

John, another participant, did not have any college expectations. John attended college originally right after completing high school but did not complete. He went to college because

his mother wanted him to. He explained that at that time, he had a very different experience from his classes here. Because he didn't do so well in classes as a traditional student, he enlisted in the Navy.

On the other hand, Arizona is enrolled in her first semester in college, part-time, and started in developmental education classes specifically in English and Math. Arizona indicated,

I wasn't encouraged to go to college. I wanted to be that person. To go to college. My background is a bit misfortunate. I realized that I have done a lot of really good work on self and trauma that I should turn around and use that to help other people. I have to have a degree as well.

Other participants shared their experience of why they were not familiar with college. Vivian shared that she and her siblings were not exposed to a lot of education at an early age. It was a lot of hard work and the mother stayed at home while her dad went out to work. It wasn't a lot of people like "Hey, I'm in college."

Lastly, Molly graduated from high school and moved to Michigan for about four years before returning back to the Mid-South. As far as college perceptions, Molly affirmed,

Finishing high school was a big thing in my family. College was encouraged. We were encouraged to go to college, but I wouldn't say that it was made as important as just getting a high school diploma. Graduate high school and then work.

Summary/Discussion

The second theme, "*Out of the comfort zone*", describes the participants' feelings of nervousness with interaction with other peers. This theme connects with current literature

regarding FGS. Oldfield (2007) found FGS will be exposed to college culture which is very different from their culture at home. Soria and Stebleton (2012) reported FGS do not have the same social capital as non-FGS; therefore, FGS are more likely to face adversity navigating the institution. Most participants in the study have been out of school for 20 plus years. Most people would be nervous about being inside a classroom again. As discussed in current literature, FGS may have difficulty to adjust to campus culture, being around other students, and knowing the hidden rules of how college works.

This theme also discusses how participants describe the lack of precollege experiences before enrolling in college. Five participants reported that college was not discussed in their homes. They were encouraged to complete and graduate from high school (if applicable). After graduation, they were expected to join the military or go to work to contribute to their household financially. For a majority of participants, the opportunity to attend college as a traditional student was not an option. Two participants did not attend high school. They dropped out in middle school because of family circumstances.

Years later, after working, taking care of family and raising children, they decided to take the GED and graduate with a high school diploma. This theme also describes the willingness and strength shown of participants to pursue college in spite of their lack of exposure.

Analysis related to research question two:

EXPERIENCES OF FIRST GENERATION COMMUTER COLLEGE STUDENTS

In response to research question two, the results of the study revealed several experiences of first generation commuter college students. Several themes emerged because of the fifteen participant interviews in relation to the first-generation commuter college students' experience.

Students shared several experiences that were both positive and negative at the local community college. After coding, three themes emerged: “*without support, there’s no way*”, “*I want to do the best I can*”, and “*the struggle is real*”.

“Without support, there’s no way”

This theme highlights the participants’ experiences and interactions with family. Participants emphasized the importance of relationships as a positive experience as a first generation, commuter college student. Students were seeking positive experiences on campus as well as support from their own families. Participants reflected on their high level of encouragement and support they received from their family. This level of support is what also made them feel they could really be successful as a first-generation, non-traditional college student. Students believed that if their family supported them positively and if they were able to receive the proper amount of support on campus, they would succeed in their classes.

John, a husband and father of one, shared that he came to college as a non-traditional student for his son. He wanted to be a good example for him. John is looking forward to graduation day to show his family that he did it. John shared,

Graduation is very important to me. I initially did this, came to school, to show my son that anything is possible with the good Lord. I wanted to show him that he can do anything that he puts his mind to. I don’t want him to make some of the decisions that I made. I want him to see if dad can do it, he can too. He is a teenager so I know he is watching and I want to set the right example. It has not always been easy but I did the work and put in the time. I have envisioned my graduation day. I will be proud of my

hard work and very happy to celebrate with my family. I will graduate after this semester and then go to Ole Miss.

The lead author felt very connected to John's story because of their own personal experience. The lead author's father is a first-generation college student. He attended college as a traditional college student and completed all degree requirements in 1983 but was never told that he was eligible for graduation. After waiting patiently for four decades, her father will finally receive his bachelor's degree as a non-traditional student on May 5, 2018. Graduation day will be very special for the lead author's father and her family.

Other students knew in order to survive their grueling schedules, they must have spousal and familial support. Susan, for example, was a full-time employee as well as a full-time student. Susan voiced,

I knew I was going to do this. Even my husband was worried but I was like, I'm taking six classes and I'm going to be busy. There are going to be nights that I'm not cooking dinner so you guys are going to have to make plans. I may have to leave dishes in the sink because I have class or homework. I don't let it stress me out because I knew what I signed up for.

In terms of the importance of relationships and support, Angela, a participant, spoke freely regarding her support from her family and the college and how it contributed to her success. Angela confirmed,

If I didn't have this support, I don't think I would have continued. Because I am the type if it's not broke, don't fix it. I want to do other things but without the support of my

family and like here, I mean it's ultimate. That's going to make or break you, because you need that encouragement. Somebody to go to when you have questions or need help.

Another participant, Callie, a recent graduate, discussed the strength of her marriage and the amount of support her husband provided as she went through this process. Callie asserted,

I have been blessed. My husband was very proud and I owe it to him. I always say I owe it to him. And he says it was all me. I owe it to him because without him, his support, there's no way because of my kids. Who was going to take care of my kids? Who was going to feed them? You know, who was going to going to do this? He cooked for them, he did everything.

Summary/Discussion

This theme, “*without support, there's no way*” describes the importance of family and how participants attributes their success to them. This theme also explains how these support systems encouraged their education. This theme connects very well with the construct of mattering. As described in the literature review, mattering is very similar to sense of belonging. The way students are supported by their families, children, and parents truly matter.

Students need institutional support but more importantly FGS need familial support more than anything. Rosenburg and McCullough (1981) found mattering very important to individuals on an interpersonal and societal level. The people who are usually within the inner circle, for example, parents, siblings, and children provides the interpersonal relationship. Social institutions such as church, community, colleges and universities, and government is the societal level (Rosenburg & McCullough, 1981). Students also perform better when they are supported.

Rendon (1994) found when marginalized students including FGS, are encouraged in their academic efforts, it leads to students being successful in college.

“I want to do the best I can”

Although most participants expressed feelings of nervousness when first attending college, they were surprised at their level of performance inside of the classroom. The lead author asked participants about their thoughts and feelings of difficulty with their academic studies. More than half of the participants reported that they thought college would be harder, in terms of academic rigor. Some of the participants did not have any indication of college, the level of academic rigor, or had any idea of the collegiate environment. In other words, it was like picking up where they left off in high school. They felt that they were able to keep up with the amount of studying required to be successful.

Lakeisha, for example, is one of the participants who worked full-time, single mother, and attended classes four nights a week. She and her daughter completes homework in the car on the way from school/work until her daughter is dropped off at her grandmother's house. Lakeisha works hard for herself but for her daughter as well. Lakeisha affirmed,

Since I've been here, I've pushed myself harder than I ever have. I've passed all of my classes that I took each semester.

Webber, a first semester student, is attending college after recently completing his GED. After being asked about thoughts of college, Webber indicated that he was terrified. After being in college for two months as the time of his interview he said he was terrified at first, terrified. But after a while he was starting to get comfortable. He is working full-time and taking three classes.

Molly, another participant, shared her experience of being an online student and coming to campus for one evening class. Molly shared,

You have to be focused, because you're responsible for submitting assignments on time. I work hard to be the best. I want to do nursing so being a mom is a priority, working full-time is a priority, but I take my classes seriously as well.

Another student, Kurt, was surprised by the level of academic rigor in college.

Kurt said,

I guess it's what I expected. I was just not the model student. I know it sounds terrible but if I'm paying my money for something, I definitely want to do the best I can.

Summary/Discussion

This theme, "*I want to do the best I can*" discussed the level of confidence shown by participants. This theme also explores that participants felt comfortable with the material. Students felt the level of difficulty was not bad. They felt they were able to keep up with the instructor and submit assignments on time. The findings in this theme contradicts current literature. Current literature discuss how colleges and universities are lacking in academic rigor. Community colleges often receives most of the harsh criticisms. Some of the criticisms include "watering down the curriculum", and "teaching practical instead of educational skills" (Arum & Roksa, 2011). However, in this study, participants expressed their comfort level with their academic courses. Majority of the participants in this study were full-time employees and attended college at least part-time. The students thought their classes would be unbearable; however, they completed their assignments and completed their courses.

Miyazaki, and Janosik (2009) found FGS are less likely to ask questions or seek help from faculty in their academics. In this study, participants expressed they did not fail or suffer from the level of academic rigor. They (the participants) did not feel that their college courses was extremely difficult. Students asked their instructors questions as well as participated in class discussions. Jenkins, The lead author was surprised at this finding because of the assumption that returning students may have difficulty because non-traditional students are out of school for several years before returning.

“The struggle is real”

The lead author spent a large amount of time with participants to understand participants’ feelings of adding college to their already busy schedules. To grasp the concept of time, the lead author asked each participant to share a “snapshot” of their day beginning with the time each participant started their day and the time they ended their day. The results were shocking. Ten of the fifteen participants begin their day at 4:30 a.m. with getting dressed for work or getting children ready for school and out of the door at 6:45 a.m. to be at work and school on time. The participants shared that other family members picked up their children from school or attended after-school care with an external childcare facility.

After working a complete eight to ten-hour shift, the participants headed to their evening classes which typically start at 6:00 p.m. or 6:30 p.m. Evening classes are scheduled for two hours and forty-five minutes with end times running at 8:45 p.m. or 9:15 p.m., respectively. After being in class, students shared that their evening was not done. If the participants had children, they had to make sure they attending to their bedtime routines before ending the night with additional studying for exams while eating dinner as well as attend to leftover household duties such as washing dishes, cleaning, or washing and folding clothes. Most of the participants

revealed that they did not go to bed until midnight or 1:00 a.m. each night and start their routine again the next day. Participants shared their feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and fear of failure because of the lack of time spent with family.

Lakeisha, a participant, explained that she would leave work, pick up her daughter, stop by a drive-thru to pick up dinner, and they would complete homework in the car while she was commuting to evening school classes. She dropped her daughter off at her grandmother's house and would come to class. Lakeisha attends college full-time, therefore, she followed this same schedule for four nights a week. Lakeisha said time management is vital to her success.

Tasha, a single mother of three, affirmed her biggest challenge on campus as FGS was making sure she had the time to do her work, specifically, homework. Tasha found that organization and time management was very important if she intended to be successful as a mother and student.

Arizona, a 37-year-old wife originally from Arkansas, shared the importance of time management with work and life balance.

Arizona indicated,

There is always a way. So sure, fitting a new schedule in my life, trying to figure out when can I study, and when do I study English, when do I study Algebra, when do I go to work, when do I go to sleep? Yeah, it's just figuring out how to make it work, and there's always a way. So you just do it.

Derek, a husband and father of two, was very vocal on his thoughts of his challenges as FGS. After being asked his biggest challenge,

Derek expressed,

The struggle is real...My life was so comfortable. Because before school, I would get off work and watch TV. Relax. Now it's all out of whack because I must think about when I get off work, do I have accounting homework? Okay, do I have history homework? Do I have a biology test? Your whole life changes so drastically. You're like wait a minute. When do I get a moment to myself?

John found his biggest challenge was the actual scheduling of his classes.

John said,

The hardest thing I had to deal with was the scheduling of classes. There are some things they don't tell you. Like for instance, students really shouldn't take Accounting and Calculus together. It's too much. I would rather have a balance of one or two hard classes and some lighter classes mixed in. That goes back to advising though.

Being a FGS, there is so much fear and self-doubt that occurs for some students. Two participants shared their experience of their thoughts of becoming a student. Vivian described her biggest challenge as FGS was convincing herself to go to college.

Vivian explained,

I think the biggest challenge was to step through the door, because I'm thinking, "I'm too old for this. This is not for me." And doubting yourself and thinking of a reason not to do it or putting roadblocks...I think the biggest challenge was to just get out there and say, "Come on, I'm going to do it." And then just do it.

While Vivian found stepping into the building as a challenge, John found it to be his biggest success as a student.

John indicated,

I am just happy that I stepped into the building. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was registration. The line was long. I was getting ready to leave. Then God said to me, don't you get out of this line. So I stayed. And it seemed like the line disappeared. I was happy that I stayed.

In conclusion, the lead author was very impressed with the response of one participant. The lead author felt that Callie's biggest challenge being FGS really summarized the thoughts of the fifteen participants of the study.

Callie emphasized,

The challenge of a first-generation student is not knowing what to do. Not knowing where to start. Not having anybody there to be able to guide you of what you should do. What you should know. I think that was the biggest thing. If you have parents graduate, they kind of guide you in the right direction of what you should take, what you shouldn't take. And kind of set a boundary of what you should do. I think that's the difference. And you feel lost when you're not. You feel lost. You depend on other people.

Summary/Discussion

This theme, "*The struggle is real*" thoroughly describes the everyday nonacademic commitments which affect college experiences. This theme correlates well with current literature. Burlison (2015) discussed how nonacademic commitments affected commuter student

involvement and engagement on campus. Most first-generation, commuter college students have work and family commitments which takes up a great deal of their time. Therefore, first-generation students may find it perplexing when attending college to balance their work/life of multiple schedules, roles, and responsibilities.

This theme discussed how participants juggled with learning how to deal with family members while also making time for college to make good grades. It also captures the challenges that first-generation, non-traditional college students face. Students were very open regarding the various challenges they face as first-generation, non-traditional college students. The participants explained how their experiences vary from traditional-aged college students.

Non-traditional students have some nonacademic commitments that traditional-aged students have not experienced yet. Burlison (2012) found “nonacademic commitments related to family reduced the chances for students to be involved on campus” (p. 29) Some students are caring for aging parents, raising children, working fulltime, and going to college. All of the participants had other life priorities in addition to being a college student which affected their academic performance while in school. College is not easy. Being a parent is not easy. Working full-time is not easy. The participants really work through various challenges to be very successful in college and in life. Burlison (2015) suggested that balancing both responsibilities for family and school can present challenges for non-traditional commuter students.

Analysis related to research question three: PERCEPTIONS OF ENGAGEMENT WITH FACULTY AND STAFF

In response to research question three, the results of the study revealed several experiences of first generation commuter college students and their perceptions of their engagement with faculty and staff on campus.

Non-traditional students, as explained in the literature review, usually do not have time to be extremely involved on campus. Participants explained they leave work and commute straight to class. Therefore, after confirmation with all participants in the study, the lead author found the only place participants' engaged with faculty was inside of the classroom. It was also interesting that most of the instructors that taught the participants in the study were adjunct instructors. Adjunct instructors are not required to have office hours. Students usually communicate with adjunct instructors prior to class or after class. Adjunct instructors also provide contact information such as a Google phone number, email address, or they may be contacted through our learning management center, Canvas.

The lead author was very surprised at the positive experiences participants shared about their engagement with adjunct instructors. Participants also shared the two main departments where they engaged with staff was the Financial Aid office and Student Development Center. The financial aid office have three financial aid counselors and the Student Development Center have an admissions counselor, one academic counselor, two career-technical counselors, and an e-learning specialist.

Overall, participants shared several experiences of their engagement with faculty and staff that were both positive and negative at the local community college. The findings in this section will be divided into two parts: "*Positive experiences*" and "*I got a little bit of push back*".

“Positive experiences”

The participants of the study attributed their success as FGS to their faculty members. Participants praised how attentive and the amount of support they received from full-time and adjunct faculty members. All fifteen participants raved about their experiences with faculty and staff at the commuter campus of the community college. Most of the participants were taught by adjunct instructors who have full-time commitments to other companies. The main responsibility of adjunct instructors is to come to class and teach. It was very refreshing to hear the wonderful stories shared by the participants.

One participant, Vivian, briefly explained her engagement with her professors as great. Vivian described,

All of my professors were professional. All were extending that olive branch to help you with something, to make sure you knew what places you need to go to get tutoring or where to go to do this or whatever. They always were helpful and trying to motivate you to do your work and all of that. So, I think that’s pretty good here.

Not only did Vivian share positive experiences with faculty, she even spent time admiring staff.

Vivian shared,

I even felt supported with you guys. When we come to class, y’all always speak. This nice lady (unidentified staff member) noticed I was lost and stopped to ask if I needed help. I always feel like everybody is so helpful, speaking, and being nice to everybody.

Tasha had a wonderful experience with her instructors as well. She felt her interactions with faculty and staff were very favorable.

Tasha said,

It's great coming here. I think I made a good decision by coming here. I met a lot of different people, different ages, and everybody's pretty much helpful that I come in contact with in classes I've been in.

Molly, primarily an online student, decided to take her math courses on campus. She describes her engagement on campus very similar to her experiences online.

Molly purported,

My instructors were always available. I would email them. They came to class early or stayed late to help us. They also provided their phone numbers and email addresses.

Most participants have thoroughly enjoyed their experience as FGS at the commuter campus. Olivia clarified how supportive her experience has been with the faculty and staff here.

Olivia described,

This has been a great experience for me. The openness, the willing to help, the willing to assist and not feeling like I'm asking a dumb question or feeling like you should know this. It's very positive here. I would like to add even though we are non-traditional students here, we are treated as if we are traditional students, so they don't look at us as if at this age, you should know this work or whatever. We're all treated very respectfully and they're open to solve whatever problems we have.

Michael felt that his experiences were extremely positive based on the relationships established with faculty and staff.

Michael exclaimed,

The faculty here is absolutely amazing. Again, coming from other schools and their ability to be transparent is an amazing thing. Most times, you see some people in higher education and they have theirs. So they are remotely disconnected which connected from the classroom. This faculty and staff will let you know, “I’ve been where you’re at. I’ve been where you’re trying to go and I’m going to bridge all of the gaps that need to be bridged to make sure you get to where you gotta go. Relationships and associations have been very warm.

Summary

This theme, “*Positive experiences*” discussed the positive experiences of engagement with faculty on campus. Positive relationships in postsecondary education is highly correlated with academic success among FGS (Davis, 2010). Astin (1984) believed the quality and quantity of student involvement directly impacted student learning and development. The results from this study revealed many participants had various levels of involvement, academically and socially, while on campus. Soria and Stebleton (2009) found FGS who are academically engaged in the classroom impacts intellectual and academic development.

This study supports current literature because the participants in the study had academic integration. Tinto (1993) defined academic integration occurs when students become attached to the intellectual life of the college. All of the current literature shows most non-traditional students do not engage on campus. This is very true in relation to the findings in this study.

Most of the participants did not have social integration. Most of the participants in the study barely have time to pick up dinner before going to class. Non-traditional, FGS commuter students do not have a lot of time because of their nonacademic commitments. The lead author selected the “positive experience” theme because it was a sentiment shared amongst most of the participants. Students not only felt supported by faculty but by staff as well. If students know that they can go to faculty and staff who are willing to help, the likelihood of students feeling comfortable leads to retention and eventually to more success stories.

Another important finding in this section is the admiration and appreciation the participants in the study showed toward adjunct instructors. As discussed earlier, the lead author was very impressed to hear great experiences about adjunct instructors. Currently, adjunct instructors are paid very little for the amount of work they do. Adjunct instructors usually come to class early and leave class late. They provide contact information for students to reach them after hours and have proven to help students at any time. The institution should consider additional strategies to better support these adjuncts to serve students since the students reported how important they are.

“I got a little bit of push back”

With any process, there will be ups and downs. While most participants had glowing things to say regarding their positive experiences on campus, some participants shared some of their engagement with faculty and staff which were not as positive. Since all of the participants in this study are non-traditional (by age), some participants felt they did not receive respect upon entering the college as a first-generation college student.

Susan was not impressed with first impressions of staff members and the lack of professionalism shown during the registration process. As a non-traditional student with years of human resources experience, Susan was shocked at the level of communication she received from staff members.

Susan shared,

I came here to get registered. I think it was the last day or two to register prior to registration being over. I come here to conduct business and I go in to check on my registration. I got a little bit of push back at first. I understand that they were probably had a long day, probably tired and wanted to go but at the same time it's your job. It's your job. It's what you signed up to do. I was told to go into the hallway to get a printout. It was not there so I returned to the same room. The counselors in the room sighed and breathed hard as if I was bothering them. I can take it. But what's unfortunate is what if this happened to an 18-year-old without confidence? How demeaning and how disappointing is that on their first start in their college career?

Angela experienced a negative feedback while trying to get help from the tutoring department. Angela dropped out of middle school in seventh grade because of family issues.

Angela said,

You know I didn't go to school pass the 7th grade. I didn't even finish the 7th grade. You know I was just struggling trying to figure out this algebra and then I went to the tutoring department. I went in for help, told her what I needed and she said okay have a seat. Sit down, do what you can and when you can't figure it out, you let me know. So I sat there and opened my book and all of this is just numbers on a page with letters. I politely

closed my book, put it in my bag, and I left. Some of us are intimidated to ask for help because you don't want to see inadequate. When you're given a response like that, you don't want to go back. Just be a little understanding to people circumstances because everybody is not the same.

Derek at some point in this college career did not feel supported by one of his instructors. Derek felt that he did not relate or tried to relate to his students.

Derek explained,

I experienced last semester with a guy, I couldn't even remember his name if you wanted me to but I know he was straight up asshole. You ask a question, he make you seem as if you were dumb, didn't know what you were talking about. He may have been an outlier. One of those guys who's so structured to where he learned it at an easy pace, so you should too. Which is fine but the thing is, don't assume I know it. And that's what he would do. So I would go to the class, sit in the back, and wouldn't say a word. I passed the class but I hope I never see him again. So that's probably the worst class I have taken here.

Another not so favorable experience that several participants stated was the lack of advising they received from faculty and staff. LaKeisha shared as FGS the frustration of trying to locate her actual advisor because she needed transfer information based on her major.

LaKeisha asserted,

There was a mix-up in my advisor. I guess because of my major. They didn't know who my advisor was at the time. They were sending me to one person and he was like, "No, I'm not your advisor." And they would send me to another person. They were like, "No,

I'm not your advisor." So, I was like, "Well, I don't know where to go." So I just went back to Financial Aid and I told them, I said, "Well, he gave me some great pointers but he still told me he wasn't my advisor in this major that I was trying to study.

Summary/Discussion

This theme, "*I got a little bit of push back*", shed light on some engagement experiences that were negative to participants. This theme will also help with recommendations and strategies needed to prevent future instances from happening again. Davis (2010) discusses the importance of relationships and how vital they can be to a first-generation college students' academic success. It is important for FGS to establish a rapport with faculty and non-faculty staff members (Davis, 2010). It is unrealistic to expect all collegiate experiences to be positive; however, institutions do not want students to have bad experiences. When students have a negative experience on campus, it can lead to students leaving college (Tinto, 1975). Institutions need to engage students so they can in return be retained and persist to the next level. The lead author was appreciative of participants being comfortable to share their negative experiences. In order to effectively make changes, we must know the areas that needs improvement.

OVERALL SUMMARY

This section discussed the emerging themes revealed during the interviews with the participants of the study. Research has found that first-generation college students experience difficulty transitioning to higher education (Pascarella, et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993). The themes were developed based on the three research questions explained in section one of this manuscript. The participants explained their perceptions of college, their perceptions of their experiences on campus, and whether their perceptions of engagement with faculty and staff had a positive or negative impact on their collegiate experience.

Specifically, findings from this study indicate that the majority of the participants were satisfied with their experience at this institution. First-generation, non-traditional college students felt their engagement with faculty and staff had a positive impact on their collegiate experience. Most of the participants' engagement occurred with faculty members inside of the classroom. Although, there were a few negative experiences described above, there is always room for improvement.

The final section of this study will discuss the overview of the study, present implications and provide engagement strategies to improve services for underserved, first-generation, non-traditional commuter students, and discuss recommendations for future research.

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, & CONCLUSION

SUMMARY

This qualitative study explored first-generation, non-traditional students' perceptions and experiences of interactions with faculty. This study focused on whether engagement with faculty and staff had a positive or negative impact on first-generation student experiences. The qualitative research process was utilized to present participants' voices to build patterns, categories, and themes as the data emerged (Cresswell, 2013).

Accordingly, fifteen participants shared their perceptions of college prior to enrollment as well as perceptions on their experiences at an institution of higher education. Participants were excited to participate in the study because they wanted their experiences to help with advocating for changes for incoming first-generation college students. This section provides a brief overview of the study. In addition to implications for policy and practice, recommendations of engagement strategies that may be helpful for researchers and practitioners will be discussed, as well as suggestions for future research will be presented.

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

The conceptual framework utilized for this study focused on literature of first-generation students. The study focused on defining first-generation students, demographics of FGS, challenges and characteristics of FGS, low income FGS, cultural adjustment for FGS, and strategies for helping FGS. This study also highlighted the works of Astin, Tinto, Kuh, Schlossberg, and Rendon, who are well-known theorists in the field of higher education in relation to persistence, retention, transition, validation, and engagement.

The primary focus was to explore the following questions: 1) What perceptions did first-generation possess about attending college prior to enrollment? 2) What type of experiences have first-generation students encountered at the DeSoto Center at Northwest Mississippi Community College? 3) What type of engagement do FGS share in relation to faculty or staff that they perceive as having positively or negatively affected their college experience?

To gain insight to the experiences as perceived by the first-generation college students and to gather an understanding of how to improve services for incoming students, fifteen students currently enrolled at the two-year institution participated in qualitative interviews. Data was collected after receiving IRB approvals from Northwest Mississippi Community College and The University of Mississippi. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to garner more in-depth perceptions and experiences related to the first-generation, non-traditional commuter college student experience in higher education. After carefully reviewing the transcripts of

interviews for each participant in this study, the researcher identified common experiences and perceptions of the participants while they were enrolled at the two-year community college.

The demographics of the participants in the study was very diverse. Ten of the participants identified as female and five of the participants identified as male. The number of male and female participants were not even; however, their perceptions and experiences were somewhat similar in both gender categories. Majority (nine) of the participants were African American, three White, two Native American, and one Hispanic/Latino. All fifteen participants were identified as non-traditional students because they were above the age of 25. Eight participants were classified as full-time students, enrolled in 12 or more credit hours per semester. Seven participants were part-time students, enrolled in 6 or more credit hours per semester. Four participants completed a general education diploma (GED). Eleven participants completed a traditional high school diploma. Nine students were freshman and six students were sophomores.

Data analysis occurred through the process of a manual coding team. The lead author along with a coding team of three individuals. Analysis occurred in multiple phases. The lead author highlighted similar phrases and quotes from interviews that were significant to the study. Analysis then proceeded in a series of steps: open coding, axial coding, categories, and themes. Lastly, the lead author refined and integrated the categories until themes emerged.

Five themes emerged from the study. The themes were: it's all about the jobs, out of comfort zone, without support, there's no way, I want to do the best I can, and the struggle is real. Participants shared various their perceptions and experiences as FGS. Participants expressed that their relationship with faculty was one of the most important aspects of their collegiate experience. Students indicated that they engaged the most with faculty members

primarily in the classroom. Majority of the participants were very pleased with their first collegiate experience on campus. Although not always a positive experience the majority of students had great interaction and engagement with faculty. A few participants had a negative experience on campus with faculty and staff members. The strategies and recommendations suggested later in this section will be helpful when assisting FGS as well as other underserved students.

The participants indicated the importance of jobs, which suggests the importance of linking employment outcomes and job opportunities with academic offerings to help students make connections with their coursework. The participants shared their experiences of being nervous, scared, and terrified with returning to college after twenty plus years of being outside of a classroom. It is important to note that students were apprehensive about interacting with other peers, especially younger, traditional-aged students. Therefore, faculty members may consider requiring students to work together in small groups in an effort for students to get to know each other.

The participants also indicated the importance of relationships. Students were very proud to be the first person in their family to attend college but they need support from their families as well as the institution to be successful. Students openly discussed their challenges with balancing work, family, school, which suggests the importance of creating workshops or providing information on time management, study skills, and college orientation. It also suggests that students need access to advisors and counselors to help navigate through the process of balancing their responsibilities. The participants were surprised at the level of academic rigor. Participants thought college was not as bad as they thought it would be, which suggests that academic courses may not be too difficult if students are prepared for learning.

Some participants shared that they needed to see instructors after class for assistance or go to tutoring for math classes.

Student engagement primarily occurred inside of the classroom. This supports current literature and is indicative of FGS, non-traditional, commuter students. Students who fall into this category typically will not have a lot of time in their schedules to be involved on campus. Participants were very impressed with their instructors, most of whom are adjunct instructors. This suggests that institutions should find more ways to support adjunct instructors because the students heavily praised them. Students felt connected to the institution by the relationships they established with faculty and staff members. Overall, all of the participants in the study was very happy with their selection of attending the institution.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study have numerous implications related to policy and practice for administrators, faculty, and staff at institutions working with underserved students, particularly first-generation, non-traditional commuter college students. Kuh (2005) stated engagement is two-fold: what the institution does and what the student does. The call of action now is to focus on what are institutions doing to engage students to improve retention rates. Therefore, communities involving academia can utilize these implications to facilitate conversations regarding first-generation student persistence, retention, and engagement. Driven by the findings of this study, the implications for policy and practice is the institutional support. Colleges and universities need to prepare with additional programs and resources to make first-generation students' pathway to and through college easier.

The literature review provided a concrete framework for understanding that first-generation students require extensive institutional support. A key issue identified in relation to FGS and improving engagement and retention requires the need for data collection (Peabody, Hutchens, Lewis, & Deffendall, 2011). There should be a question on the admissions application to identify FGS. Davis (2010) encourages institutions to establish protocol for entering FGS into the student records database. Darling (2015) provided several approaches and strategies to support FGS, non-traditional, commuter students' success. FGS need an intentional educational plan supportive of academic and career goals (Darling, 2015). The findings of this study revealed

that more preparation is needed for faculty and staff to work with underserved populations. In order for FGS to be successful, they must be supported on campus and it starts with being welcomed upon entering the college during their first visit. FGS must have support services available as well. Support services include but are not limited to advising, counseling, library, financial aid, tutoring, and bookstore.

Institutions should provide access to all support services for all students regardless of whether they attend day classes, evening classes, or online. In this particular study, participants were frustrated that the bookstore closes daily at 4:30 p.m. because it does not accommodate non-traditional students attending evening classes. Students are aware that they may purchase supplies such as pencils and scantrons in the main office; yet, students are unable to purchase other items such as textbooks, apparel, electronics, etc. in comparison to traditional students. Establishing long hours of availability of the bookstore could provide students access to needed materials as well as potentially increase revenue for the bookstore.

In order for first-generation, non-traditional students to be successful, it appears that institutions must utilize intrusive advising as a means to keep students on track and focused to complete a college degree. Darling (2015) found when colleges and universities fail to recognize the unique needs of FGS, non-traditional, and commuter students might result in creating barriers to student persistence and engagement. Administrators should ensure that faculty and staff are being consistent with providing guidance throughout the entire enrollment and registration process for the appropriate courses needed for students' pathways. Participants shared the frustration of not knowing their advisors, being assigned the incorrect advisor, being ignored while meeting with advisors, as well as being expected to know what courses they need to take during their meetings. Students who are first-generation college students need help and guidance

throughout the advising process. Moreover, advisors and counselors should encourage students to pre-register for classes, complete financial aid paperwork in a timely fashion, help students with study skills. This approach could cultivate positive relationships which are needed to enable student success.

Faculty members should work on their skills to improve the level of student engagement. For most non-traditional students, most of their engagement will occur inside the classroom. Most faculty members will have the opportunity to have the most contact with first-generation, non-traditional students. Therefore, faculty needs to be trained on how to work with these students.

Faculty should also be open to communicate how students are actually participating in class and identify whether they are engaged and learning the material. Faculty should be encouraged to talk with students, know all of the support services and refer students who reach out for help. As literature shows, many times, students will not ask for help. Therefore, if faculty engage students and call them after class, the student has a better chance of succeeding and passing the class.

RECOMMENDATIONS OF ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

After reviewing the results of the study, there are a few recommendations that should be considered to assist first generation, non-traditional, commuter college students. Students need to feel and be engaged on campus.

Implementation of a First-Generation College Experience program

The institution would benefit from developing and implementing a first-generation college student experience program for incoming first-generation college students. By creating this program, it would help persistence and retention of FGS. This program should be open to traditional and non-traditional students. The college will need to develop a way to identify first-generation students. Currently, there is not an official process for students to self-identify as a first generation student. A recommendation is to add a question regarding first-generation to the Admissions application.

After students are identified as first generation, students should be contacted by a counselor or academic advisor to join the First-Generation College Experience program. The program should consist of an orientation class to assist with acclimating first-generation students to college. The orientation class can comprise topics of time management, study skills, career building/resume skills, just to name a few. The implementation of a first-generation program on a commuter campus would be ideal to assist traditional and non-traditional students.

Intrusive Academic Advising

Students shared in their experiences on campus that they felt a lack of academic advising. Some first-generation students do not understand the role of an advisor. Some students may not receive their academic advisor contact information, or they may have received the wrong advisor. Be sure that your institution has clear instructions as well as paperwork that clearly outlines the advisor, major/pathway, and contact information.

For this study, students must meet with their advisors (many of whom are full-time instructors) which are not always available when they need them. This is especially a problem for first generation, non-traditional college students. Non-traditional students are usually working during the daytime hours and the advisors are long gone by the time the students arrive for evening classes. If your institution does not have specific advisors, academic counselors may also support that role. Intrusive academic advising is crucial to first-generation, non-traditional college student success.

Possibility of After-School Care Program

Students shared their concerns of having problems acquiring baby-sitting services for their children. The institution involved in this study has a strict no children on campus policy especially in academic classroom settings as a means to prevent distractions. Students in the study recommended a small childcare service available on campus to assist parents who may have issues with last minute baby-sitting issues.

The institution also has a strict attendance policy. If students enrolled in a course one night a week, they are only allowed two absences for the entire semester. Parents stated that sometimes things happen out of their control, for example, if a baby-sitter cancels at the last minute, they have to figure out a new baby-sitter or miss class. Students suggested that if a

childcare service was available on campus, student enrollment could possibly increase for afternoon and evening classes as a result of being able to bring their children to campus with them.

Support Group for Adult, Non-traditional Students

Several participants mentioned in their interviews feelings of isolation and inadequacy on campus. Students need to be engaged on campus. This recommendation will help other students succeed inside and outside of the classroom. Nontraditional students may not always feel comfortable interacting with traditional aged college students. They feel that traditional aged students may not have the same nonacademic commitments, such as work, family, roles, and responsibilities. As a result of this study, an unofficial support group was formed on campus for non-traditional students. Students are able to support each other in classes, share experiences of rearing children, and help each other with exchanging textbooks or other course materials when they complete classes which help students with financial issues.

Training for Faculty and Staff

Training will be extremely helpful to practitioners working with students on a daily basis, particularly faculty members. Faculty tends to have the most contact with students on campus. The training could include how to identify first-generation, non-traditional college students, what to do if first-generation college students are in your class, or list 5 steps to help underserved students. Participants in the study shared feelings of being overwhelmed because of their new academic commitments. This may be particularly helpful to new instructors.

Faculty are required to teach and make sure students master material covered in class in a short period time. The amount of work can sometimes be grueling for first-generation students

who have not been inside of a classroom in ten, twelve, or even fifteen years or more. Consider starting with gradual assignments with three assignments being due within a certain window of time. Keep in mind most are not enrolled in just one class, they are taking multiple classes at a time.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This manuscript focused on how first-generation students' perceived college, their experiences on campus, as well as their engagement with faculty and staff and whether they positively or negatively impacted their collegiate experience. Pike and Kuh (2005) noted that very little is known about first-generation college students' experiences. Considering the findings of the study, there are implications for future research that may be considered by higher education scholars. Meanwhile, gaining further insight into these implications would contribute to literature regarding first-generation college students' engagement and retention. Furthermore, the implications for future research would provide administrators with a framework to explore engagement strategies and remedies appropriate for first-generation, non-traditional college students. While this study identified several emerging themes of first-generation student perceptions and experiences, there remain a number of opportunities for future research.

This study yielded the results of the perceptions and beliefs of first-generation college students who happened to be non-traditional (according to age). It would be wonderful to replicate the study as a longitudinal study to follow the fifteen participants while they are attending a four-year institution. This would provide insight to the perceptions the students had entering a two-year institution in comparison to their perceptions of their experiences at a four-year institution.

There is very limited literature available on first-generation, non-traditional college students attending community colleges. Most literature involving first-generation students is

focused on traditional students. Future studies should be continued on the perceptions and experiences of first-generation students.

CONCLUSION

First-generation students will continue to be an important presence in higher education. Every first-generation student has a different story to tell (Davis, 2010). The stories may be different, but generally, they are the same. Marginalized students who enter college without support from family or other support systems end up at risk in college of not graduating. Previous research on first-generation students has produced detailed information about their demographics, their preparation for college, and the challenges they face. Overall, FGS often struggle more than non-FGS and they are less likely to graduate. Former President Obama stated in his address to joint session of Congress in 2009 that “by 2020, America will have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world” (Sutherland, 2011). President Obama started this challenge in 2009 and we are currently in the year of 2018. We have two years left until 2020.

This study suggests that first-generation, non-traditional college students can be successful with proper, positive experiences while being engaged on campus. However, students need intensive support and guidance from all members of the institution to be successful. This study is beneficial to society because empowering first-generation students to be the first college graduate in their families is not only valuable to the individual and family, it is also advantageous to the local community. Lastly, this study provides information that will hopefully inspire administrators to implement effective engagement strategies at their institutions that will improve first-generation college student retention and completion.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Email Letter to the Campus Dean of Northwest Mississippi Community College DeSoto Center
Institution: Northwest Mississippi Community College

Dear Dean,

(This research study has been approved by UM Institutional Review Board.)

My name is Tonyalle Rush and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at University of Mississippi. I would like to request your assistance in finding volunteers to participate in my doctoral study. In order to complete the requirements for my degree program, I am conducting a study to learn about the perceptions and experiences of first generation students at the DeSoto Center campus at Northwest Mississippi Community College.

I have enclosed an announcement calling for volunteers for the study. Please email this announcement to all students on the DeSoto Center campus or make available by posting on your campus. Interested students may email me at trush@go.olemiss.edu. I am particularly interested in first generation students. I will ask your students to take a short online survey to establish eligibility for the doctoral study. Students will be notified via email of their selections status. Students who meet the criteria for the study will receive an invitation to participate. Students who do not meet the criteria will be notified via email and thanked for their time. Students who agree to participate will be asked to read and sign a consent form. The consent form will explain the purpose of the study, the process of data collection, and the student's right to withdraw from the study at any time. A copy of the consent form is attached to this email.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have additional questions. I may be contacted at 662-347-8944 or via email at trush@go.olemiss.edu.

Thank you for your assistance in completing my doctoral research.

Sincerely,

Tonyalle Rush, Doctoral Student

APPENDIX B

Call for Research Study Volunteers

Calling Student Volunteers!

(This research study has been approved by UM Institutional Review Board.)

Are you the first person in your family to attend college? I am ready to listen and make your voice heard!

My name is Tonyalle Rush and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at University of Mississippi. I am looking for volunteers to participate in my doctoral study about the perceptions and experiences of first generation students at the DeSoto Center campus at Northwest Mississippi Community College.

This is an excellent opportunity for your voice to be heard. By participating in this study, you may assist other first generation students to enhance their college experience at Northwest DeSoto Center. Study participants will be asked to participate in an individual interview that will be audio-taped for approximately 1 hour.

You may volunteer if you answer “yes” to the following questions:

- 1.) Are you a first year student who is at least 18?
- 2.) Are you the first in your family to attend college (i.e. first generation college student)?

If so, please consider being a participant in a research study on first generation college students by contacting me at trush@go.olemiss.edu.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

(This research study has been approved by the UM Institutional Review Board)

Greetings and Introduction

Each interview will begin with the researcher greeting the participant and introductions.

The script will state: Hello! I am Tonyalle Rush, a doctoral student in the Higher Education program in the Department of Leadership and Counselor Education at the University of Mississippi. You must be _____ (first name of scheduled interview participant)

After greetings and introductions the researcher will say the following: Thank you for your interest and willingness to participate in this doctoral study.

Review the purpose of the study: The purpose of this study is to identify the perceptions of first generation students at a commuter campus at a two-year institution. I want to know how student engagement (interaction with faculty and staff) on campus is successful to first generation student academic success.

Review of procedures: I will ask you a series of open ended questions related to your experiences here at Northwest Mississippi Community College DeSoto Center. I will digitally record the interview and make a few notes. If there is something you do not want recorded, please let me know and I will turn off the recorder for that part of the interview. I will later transcribe the interview and send a copy for your review for accuracy. All personally identifiable information will be altered to protect your identity and privacy.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Review the release, student information document, and obtain signatures.

State: Before we proceed, please review and sign the consent form. If you have any questions regarding the purpose of this study and the interview process please feel free. I will give you a copy of the consent form for your records. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you have the right to stop at any time.

(Pause)

After the consent form is signed, and the participant is given a copy of the consent form, the interview will begin. (Pause)

Review the screening questionnaire with the student before beginning the questions.

This is a semi-structured interview. It is important to note that each interview will not be identical because the interview will be directed by the responses and level of engagement of the interviewee. However, the following questions will be addressed in each interview.

Additional questions may be included in the interviews. Since this is a qualitative study, the interview is to feel more like a conversation instead of a sterile information gathering session, this protocol is not a verbatim script but an outline that will guide the interview.

Any questions asked that are not included in this outline will appear in the transcripts of each interview.

Interview Questions

The interview will be semi-structured. The following questions may include:

1. How long have you attended Northwest Mississippi Community College?

- a. Is this your first semester or first year?
2. Tell me a little bit about your background.
 - a. Probes: Where are you from? City and State?
 - i. Do you have any siblings?
 - ii. Describe for me who you are and the community from which you come.

Additional probes for further information:

- What is your neighborhood like?
 - Describe your high school to me.
4. What expectations, if any, did you have about college?

Possible Probe:

- What shaped those expectations?
- Were your expectations met?

5. Tell me about your college experience at this college?

Possible Probes:

- Why did you select this college?
- What is it like to be on a commuter campus?
- What are your classes like?
- What are some negative experiences that were significant?
- What are some positive experiences that were significant?

6. Tell me about your experience as a student here.
 - a. Probes: How would you describe your interaction with your professors (faculty) and staff outside of the classroom? Have you gone to their office hours?
 - b. Probes: Do you feel like you are supported? Faculty or Staff that have reached you?

- c. If so, is there anyone in particular or any of your professors that you have a working relationship with?

7. Was there ever a time in your college career when you did not think you would succeed?

Explain.

Potential Probes:

- Was dropping out ever an option?
- If so how serious were you about leaving school?
- How did feel about leaving?

8. If you did doubt your ability to succeed what kept you going?

9. What does it mean to you to be the first in your family to attend college?

10. How important is graduation to you? Explain.

11. Looking back at your college experiences, what has helped to keep you going?

12. After reflecting on your college experience what does this all mean to you?

13. How do interpret these experiences?

14. How has your perception of your experience contributed to your decision to continue pursuing your college education?

15. What is the biggest challenge you have faced as a first-generation student?

16. What was your biggest success as a college student?

17. Is there anything that I should have said but did not ask you?

18. Is there anything you would like to add for my comments?

Conclusion: Before we conclude our interview is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experience? If the participant does not wish to add anything, conclude by stating:

Thank you for your time and sharing your story with me. I am very appreciative of the opportunity to have been invited into your world. I will be emailing you in the next 2-3 weeks a copy of the transcript of this interview for you to review and make any corrections or comments. I ask that you return the information within two weeks of receiving it. Again, thank you.

APPENDIX D

Email Requesting Student Participant to Review and Return Transcript

DRAFT

(This research study has been approved by the UM Institutional Review Board)

Dear Student:

I have enclosed a copy of the transcript from your interview. Please review the transcript carefully. Please make comments or corrections as you see in order for this to be an accurate description of your story. Please feel free to type your corrections on the transcript or include an attachment with your comments or concerns.

You will have two weeks from the date of this email to review your transcript and submit any corrections. If I do not receive it within this time, I will assume that you have no additional comments or corrections to the transcript and the information will be used as is.

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Tonyalle Rush
Doctoral Student

APPENDIX E

INFORMATION SHEET

Title: The Perceptions and Experiences of First Generation Students at
Northwest Mississippi Community College

Investigator

Tonyalle Rush, M.S.
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Guyton Hall
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University, MS 38677
(662) 347-8944
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Faculty Sponsor

Neal Hutchens, Ph.D.
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nhutche@olemiss.edu

By checking this box I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

Description

The purpose of this study is to identify the perceptions of first generation students at a commuter campus at a two-year institution. I want to know how student engagement (interaction with faculty and staff) on campus is successful to first generation student academic success.

Cost and Payments

There is no cost associated with this research study.

Risks and Benefits

There are no anticipated risks to you from participating in the study. You should not expect benefits from participating in this study. However, you might experience satisfaction from contributing to scientific knowledge.

Confidentiality

No identifiable information will be recorded, therefore we do not think you can be identified from this study. Research team members will have access to your records. We will protect confidentiality by coding and then physically separating information that identifies you from your responses (which is even safer than how medical records are stored today).

Right to Withdraw

You do not have to take part in this study and you may stop participation at any time. If you start the study and decide that you do not want to finish, all you have to do is to tell Ms. Rush in person, by letter, or by telephone. You may skip any questions you prefer not to answer.

IRB Approval

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

Statement of Consent

I have read and understand the above information. By completing the interview I consent to participate in the study.

Release Form

Title: The Perceptions and Experiences of First Generation Students at
Northwest Mississippi Community College

Investigator

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THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI RELEASE

For valuable consideration, I do hereby authorize The University of Mississippi, its assignees, agents, employees, designees, and those acting pursuant to its authority (“UM”) to:

- a. Record my participation and appearance on video tape, audio tape, film, photograph or any other medium (“Recordings”).
- b. Use my name, likeness, voice and biographical material in connection with these recordings.
- c. Exhibit, copy, reproduce, perform, display or distribute such Recordings (and to create derivative works from them) in whole or in part without restrictions or limitation in any format or medium for any purpose which The University of Mississippi, and those acting pursuant to its authority, deem appropriate.
- d. I release UM from any and all claims and demands arising out of or in connection with the use of such Recordings including any claims for defamation, invasion of privacy, rights of publicity, or copyright.

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone No.: _____

Signature: _____

Parent/Guardian Signature (if under 18): _____

APPENDIX F

IRB Exempt Approval of 17x-140

Inbox x



irb@olemiss.edu <irb@olemiss.edu>

Jan 26

to me, nhhutche

Ms. Rush:

This is to inform you that your application to conduct research with human participants, "The Perceptions and Experiences of First-generation students at a Commuter Campus at a Two-Year Institution" (Protocol #17x-140), has been approved as Exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(#2).

Please remember that all of The University of Mississippi's human participant research activities, regardless of whether the research is subject to federal regulations, must be guided by the ethical principles in The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research.

It is especially important for you to keep these points in mind:

- You must protect the rights and welfare of human research participants.
- Any changes to your approved protocol must be reviewed and approved before initiating those changes.
- You must report promptly to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the IRB at irb@olemiss.edu.

Jennifer Caldwell, PhD, CPIA, CIP

Senior Research Compliance Specialist, Research Integrity and Compliance

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OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AND EFFECTIVENESS

Northwest Mississippi Community College
4975 Highway 51 North Senatobia, Mississippi 38668

February 1, 2017

Ms. Tonyalle V Rush

Dear Ms. Rush,

This letter is to inform you that your research request has been approved at Northwest Mississippi Community College. You may begin conducting your research as described in your documentation.

Sincerely,

Carolyn W. Wiley
Director of Institutional Research and Effectiveness
Northwest Mississippi Community College

MANUSCRIPT 3:
THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

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Retention at institutions of higher learning is a relatively new area of interest and concern in higher education, but during the last decade an increasing emphasis has been placed on colleges and universities to retain students (Grier-Reed, Arcinue, & Inman, 2016). Attrition represents a major concern for educational administrators, faculty, students, and often parents. Ultimately, degree completion benefits individual students and a larger group of stakeholders because of the benefits that accrue to society broadly (Hunt, 2012). For example, the lifetime earnings of an individual with a bachelor's degree is approximately twice that of an individual with only a high school diploma. Attaining a baccalaureate degree provides increased social mobility. Not only do college graduates enjoy greater income, but they generally have better health, are usually promoted at a higher rate, have children that are better achievers academically, and generally experience an overall better quality of life (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013).

Retention and persistence to degree completion are major points of interest for colleges and universities and for students. Approximately 34% of students that enter college will leave without a completing a degree program (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Most of these students will leave in the first two years, with the greatest proportion exiting in the first year (Tinto, 2012). There has been little change in this statistic in recent decades. Besides potential negative impacts on students, when students leave colleges and universities without a degree, it puts additional

pressure on institutions to generate extra revenue to cover the cost of the absences of the students. There are also potential losses for society overall such as reduced tax collections and loss of expertise that an individual would otherwise acquire through degree completion. There are numerous reasons that students decide to depart from colleges including: failure to integrate, personal reasons such as homesickness or health issues, lack of finances, lack of preparation, other more lucrative opportunities, or displeasure with a course program or the institution.

In 1993 *In Leaving College: Rethinking the Cause and Cure of Student Attrition*, Vincent Tinto created a platform that assists educational institutions in gaining a deeper understanding of student retention. He brings clarity to the issues that contribute to attrition and provides methods that may be effective in combating it. Tinto (1993) emphasized how important it is for students to connect to the college campus environment and to become engaged with that environment to increase retention. Tinto encouraged engagement in and out of the classroom (i.e., curricular and co-curricular involvement) and student support programs to promote student success. Tinto's (2012) research includes roles of students, faculty, administrators, and staff as they are viewed by him as equal stakeholders in the process. Failure to complete academic programs is detrimental to student success and to the overall productivity and success of the educational institution in fulfilling its mission.

The collected experiences of minorities, nontraditional students, disadvantaged students, and other marginalized groups make retention an even greater problem for these groups. Making the adjustment to college is often more difficult for students who are part of these populations. Many of them feel isolated, disconnected, and disenfranchised (Tinto 2012), so the institutional

supports need to retain these populations is sometimes even greater than for the majority students. For instance, non-white groups at predominately white institutions (PWIs) must deal with barriers that include campus culture, racial climate, racial tension, and lack of diversity at all levels of faculty and staff (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). In many cases, minority students try to establish their place or space at PWIs. If they have limited success they often feel they are not wanted. PWIs have the additional challenge to remove the barriers that are hindering minority groups when developing the education of the majority students through rich learning experiences and exposure to diverse environments (Hunn, 2014).

The academic achievement gap between African-American students and white students is a well-documented social and political issue. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2015), the average high school dropout rate for African-Americans is 31% compared to 14% for whites. Furthermore, the U.S. Census Bureau (2015) reports that the college entrance rate for African-Americans is 36%, but for their white counterparts, the college entrance rate is 50%. In addition, according to Inside Higher Ed (2017) only 38% of African-Americans who began college in the fall of 2010 graduated within 6 years as compared to 62% of Whites. This inequity in education is a compelling social justice issue that confronts higher education and society, and there is an obligation for college administration, faculty and staff to take actions to remedy the achievement gap.

One method that has gained strength in the movement to increase retention institutions of higher learning is the implementation of high impact educational practices. Launched in 2005, a decade long national initiative, Liberty Education and American's Promise (LEAP), designed to align the goals for college learning with a new global market was sponsored by the American Association of American College and Universities (AAC&U). Furthermore, the initiative is

especially concerned with students who, historically, have been marginalized in higher education (Sandeen, 2012). Hallmarks of the LEAP initiative are building a culture of assessment and documented learning outcomes. The LEAP initiative identified and developed ten high-impact practices for fostering student growth in desired outcomes such as analytical reasoning, critical thinking, career readiness, and intercultural skills.

When students take an active role in the learning process and they are engaged both inside and outside the classroom, they have larger gains in their personal and professional growth and development. Student success for students also involved in high impact educational practices is marked by higher grades, increased retention, and more timely graduation. Not only do students in the majority benefit from these practices, but minorities, disadvantaged students, and members of marginalized groups reap greater benefits when they have the opportunity to participate in these practices. Informative for this project focused on internships, research by Wawrznski and Baldwin (2014) has documented ten high impact educational practices: First-Year Seminars and Experiences, Learning Communities, Common Intellectual Experiences, Collaborative Assignments and Projects, Writing-Intensive Courses, Undergraduate Research, Diverse/Global Learning, Internships, Service Learning/Community Based Learning, and Capstone Courses/Projects.

Colleges and universities across the United States are seeking new and effective ways to enhance student engagement as tools to increase retention. Retention is a major problem for the entire student population, but is an even greater problem for African-American students. The selection of a career and establishment in a profession are major challenges for colleges students (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Internships help students clarify a major or career path, and they can also gain valuable work experience and on-the-job training for their career while still a student.

In many cases, students realize after an internship that a career is not for them, and they can make the academic change to find a career path for which they are better suited. In other cases, after an internship many students are more motivated to complete their education because they feel they have made a good prospective career choice. Given this state of affairs, understanding the circumstances under which interns thrive is critical if universities are to fulfill their obligation of better serving historically underserved students (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005).

In an effort to speak to the issue of retention and persistence of at-risk students, a three-manuscript model will be utilized to address various methods for improving retention and persistence of at-risk students. As the lead author of one manuscript, I will analyze the internship experiences of African-American students to determine whether their experiences had an impact on their educational progress. The study will be aimed at the high impact educational practice of internships aimed at retaining African-American students in higher education, and will provide more information to universities and students regarding the internship experiences of African-American students. Ultimately, the goal is for these findings to assist faculty, career development professionals, and advisors to support African-American students in meeting their educational and career development goals (O'Neill, 2010).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internships in various forms have been documented since the Middle Ages (Sides & Mrvica, 2007), but the modern internship has been documented only since the beginning of the twentieth century, yet it continues to have an impact on job performance and career readiness. This literature review will discuss major concepts and theories related to student retention, history and benefits of internships, and the role that internship experiences, as a high impact practice, can play in student retention efforts, including for African-American students.

STUDENT RETENTION

A common theme within the study of retention in the arena of higher education is the concept that retention is of paramount importance. The workforce is changing in terms of duties and educational requirements and the need to retain more qualified students will only grow (Lotkowski, Robins, & Noeth, 2004). The landscape of the world of work is constantly changing, and a well-educated workforce must be prepared to meet employee needs. If the workforce is not developed, it presents the possibility of businesses and institutions failing. An important facet of workforce development relates to retaining students in higher education until program or degree completion. Retention has moved to the forefront in educational institutions. Low retention rates can decrease human capital, risk national economic prosperity, and weaken the financial vitality of colleges and universities (Lotkowski et al., 2004). Low retention rates not only pose a threat to workforce development but even high cost of higher education to more

affluent individuals as well. As we have discussed in this study, retention issues can especially impact under-represented students.

Student retention and students persisting to completion of their educational programs are also significant in measuring institutional effectiveness as key measures of student success. The two most noted statistics relating to student success are the freshman to sophomore retention rate, also known as annual return rate, and the cohort graduation rate (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). The freshman to sophomore retention rate measures the percentage of first year full time students who return to school the following fall semester. The cohort graduation rate is the percentage of a student's entering class that completes its associate's degree within three years or a baccalaureate degree within four, five or six years. Since there is a close relationship between annual return rate and degree/program completion, year-to-year retention and persistence rates are important statistics for measuring student success (Wild & Ebbers, 2002).

Student retention is also a strong measure of student success and has implications with regard to institutional effectiveness, institutional financial accountability, and budgetary issues. When funding is constricted, how an institution preforms in relation to student retention and graduation represents an issue important to multiple stakeholders. Increasing retention becomes a more pressing issue, not only for its benefits to the student but for its benefits to the institution, including financial viability. Policy makers at the state and federal levels have increased mandated requirements for reporting retention and graduation rates, and, in many cases, have tied them to funding (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005).

It can be difficult to predict specifically who will stay in college and complete a program, but previous research is helpful to institutions and practitioners in identifying potential barriers to

retention. Tinto (1993) and Astin (1993) make the connection between institutional relationships and college student retention. Both contend numerous factors and concerns can influence the choice of a student to stay in school or to leave. It is apparent that students who stay in college beyond the first year are more likely to complete a degree program. Astin, specifically, cited the significance of racial homogeneity in the retention of women and minority students. In addition, in 1975 Astin reported that women and minority students were more likely to engage in the college environments and thrive in educational institutions that acknowledged and supported their concerns, specifically women's colleges and historically black institutions.

Since Emancipation, education has held the promise of personal improvement and advancement for African-Americans in general. However, far too many African-Americans who look to higher education as means to achieve their goals face numerous roadblocks. Some have limited finances to pay for college, limited parental support, low levels of parental education, lack of self-confidence, and low societal expectations (Nettles & Grossman, 1986). Despite all the obstacles and barriers, many African-Americans do achieve a great deal of success in college. However, why do some succeed and why some do not is a compelling research, policy and practice issue in higher education.

One of the most prevalent issues surrounding education today in the United States is the lack of academic success of students of color, specifically, a significant persistence to graduation gap that exists between African-American students and their White counterparts. Even more so, educational challenges facing African-Americans includes the lack of equitable education, and the state of affairs; highlighted by lower degree completion by African-American males in higher education (Anderson, 2005). In recent years the terms such as marginal, crisis, and

endangered have been used to describe the condition both socially and educationally for black males (Grier-Reed et al., 2016). Moreover, recent research is more pessimistic with respect to the condition of the African-American males' educational outlook; rather it is viewed by many as a crisis. In addition, most research that places emphasis on African-American students explores their failure rather than their success (Rovai, Gallien, & Wighting, 2005). Scholarly literature on African-American men constructs an image for this subgroup that presents a deficit model. Shaun Harper's (2012) anti-deficit model suggests that in 2002, black males represented 4.3% of students enrolled in college. This percentage was consistent with the makeup of black males in 1976. However, there has been an increase in the number of African-American women in academia. Their enrollment rates have doubled in the last thirty years, yet their completion rate is not as high as their White and Asian counterparts. Consequently, various barriers to persistence leave one out of five women of color over the age of 25 with an undergraduate degree (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Given research related to retention and the need to better support African-American men in higher education, this research study is interested in the potential role and power of internships to support success for African-American men on their higher education journeys.

INTERNSHIPS

According to the academic and social integration model (Tinto, 1975, 1993) and involvement model (Astin, 1977), student retention and persistence to degree completion should be enhanced by those completing internships. Internships taken for credit usually involve supervision by an internship coordinator or a faculty member who approves the selection of placements and provides learning outcomes and supervision for the intern. Usually, an assessment takes place to ensure learning has occurred. The well-structured internship is an

extension of the classroom and is a vital part of the collegiate experience. The more students engage while in college, especially with faculty and staff, the greater their academic gains and development of social skills. An internship is a powerful tool to increase student interaction with faculty, subsequently increasing involvement and strengthening their overall academic experience.

Research by Tinto (1993) also suggests that students involved in the academic and social community and in meaningful learning experiences with their cohort usually make a greater investment in their education and persist to graduation. An internship can help take theories and classroom concepts into real-life practice to strengthen the learning process. In the absence of academic inclusion, students often have poor academic success and too often depart early. As revealed by Tinto (1997), “The significant predictors of junior and senior persistence proved to be student involvement in learning activities, students view of quality teaching, advising, and course work, and their contact with faculty” (p. 618).

The history of internships and apprenticeships dates back to before the Middle Ages (Sides & Mrvica, 2007). On-the-job training was practiced by the Roman, Greek, Chinese, and Vedic communities to teach interns a craft as a method to gain entry into skilled professions. During the Middle Ages, indentured servants often bought their freedom through practicing a trade developed from apprenticeships, creating a pathway for rising to the middle class (Sides & Mrvica, 2007). The apprentices learned a skill or trade that enabled them to create a product or perform a service. The entire process enabled the apprentices to learn how to create a business within the community. In the United States, internships and apprenticeships were instrumental in teaching trades, fostering economic growth through business expansion, and furthering the educational processes of society.

Existing as apprenticeships for centuries, today's college student internships are called by various names. "Internship" and "cooperative education" are the two most recognized titles in the United States (Gault et al., 2010). The modern internship is an intensive kind of applied learning. Other kinds of applied learning include field education, clinical experiences, and practicums. The overall purpose of an internship is for students to obtain career experience, on-the-job training, and professional skills in supervised settings. Internships may or may not be connected to a credit-bearing course with academic content. Typically, interns spend a substantial amount of time at their worksite during the semester, often more than ten hours a week for eight to ten weeks. Internships may be paid or unpaid and may or may not be designed to have a public service component.

Internships help students transition beyond the classroom to develop skills through interactions, understanding, knowledge, and perspectives gained from the workplace. What distinguishes internships from part-time jobs and other forms of active learning is that there is the presence of supervision and self-study that enables students to "learn by doing" and to have that learning connected to goals and measurable outcomes. The learning that takes place is deliberate and not by chance. There is a systemic balance between learning and contributing, and the student, the educational institution, and the placement site must share in the responsibility to establish a high-quality experience (NACE, 2011).

There have been several studies that have addressed the benefits students gain from participating in internships. The consensus from the studies is that students find numerous rewards from the internship process, including: stronger resumes, more job offers that come earlier, higher starting salaries, ease of transition from college to work, greater job satisfaction and tenure, greater overall success on the job, strengthened analytical reasoning and, critical

thinking skills, improved interviewing skills, improved networking opportunities, extra academic credit in many cases, and application of knowledge gained in the classroom (Divine, 2007; Gault et al., 2010). Cook and Pettijohn (2004) noted that students found that internships helped them work with diverse groups of people in various different settings, which helped them to grow both personally and professionally.

Employers also reap benefits in employing student interns: providing a first opportunity to recruit the best students, getting fresh ideas from recent graduates, building stronger relationships with colleges, serving as a valuable source of part-time employees, providing a stronger selection of future employees, providing a low-cost recruiting method, and affording greater networking opportunities with faculty and staff. Interns can easily be evaluated by employers for full-time, long-term positions without making a long-term commitment. In effect, hiring well-vetted interns can reduce the cost associated with high turnover (Divine, 2007). Employers also benefit from the cost saving of training and recruiting new employees while developing a highly-qualified, trained pool of potential new hires. The *2017 NACE Job Outlook Report* stated that in the class of 2016, 53% of new hires had internship experience.

Internships are also of great benefit to colleges and universities. Internship programs help the institution build corporate relationships. The relationships fostered can help the educational institutions build stronger curricula and keep curricula current with national and global trends. The relationships allow faculty access to industries where future graduates will be employed. This allows timelier and more accurate career expectations for students before entering the world of work. There is usually an evaluation process on the student's job performance prepared by the employer that provides feedback to the internship coordinator, who can determine career readiness and the need for possible changes in curricula. The student

provides an evaluation as well on how classroom learning played out into the work environment. This could be a valuable tool on the academic side to make changes in curricula. In addition, strong relationships with businesses who hire interns can provide support to the institution in the form of grants, scholarships, or in-kind donations (Divine, 2007). Last, internships properly promoted can add prestige to institutions or departments and even be used as a recruiting tool.

Research on how internships impact student retention does not appear to be as well-known as how internships influence personal growth, employment, and career development. Among those who have examined skill development, Knouse et al. (1999) noted that internships could improve students' academic performance. According to their research, internships help students to develop skillsets that can immediately impact classroom performance in the area of communications, time management, and critical thinking, ultimately having a positive effect on retention. Gault et al. (2000) explored how internships impacted career development skills. Their results indicated that students reported that internships prepared them better than classroom teaching for some personal interaction skills, analytical reasoning skills and job acquisition skills. The primary reason cited for better understanding the internship experiences of African-America students in this study is to identify ways that internships can promote retention of African-American students.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Kolb (1984), building on the foundation of Lewis and Dewey, devised a comprehensive theory which approaches education and learning as a lifelong process which is rooted in philosophy and cognitive and social psychology. Kolb's model is a four-stage description of the learning cycle that makes the connection between experience and reflection, which are then used to direct active experimentation and develop the choice of new experiences. Kolb identifies

these four stages as concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. They stem from each other in a cycle. However, the cycle can be entered into at any point, as long as each step is followed sequentially. The learning process provides feedback, which enables new action and evaluation of that action. It is important for the learner to repeat the learning cycle numerous times, so it can be thought of as a repetitive cycle.

Experiential learning theory lends credence to the significance of experiential activities, such as lab work and fieldwork. The theory does not suggest that those forms of learning should take priority, but rather stresses the links that are made between each stage in the process. The model is critical of encounters, activities, or courses that offer little preparation before the experience or no opportunity for reflection after the experience and to relate it other theories or framework (Jenkins 1997).

Kolb (1984) identifies two primary axes in the cycle: the abstract conceptualization-concrete experience dimension and the active experimentation-reflective observation dimension. These connect the two main dimensions of the learning process to the two significant ways in which we learn. The first is how we receive new information or gain insight, and the second is how we systematically process our perceptions (Smith and Kolb 1986). Perceptions range from concrete to abstract, being in the moment to only visualizing it. Our perceptions are then transformed so that we are fully able to understand the experience. At this point individuals differ in their predisposition for experimentation and observation.

Kolb (1984) suggests that students develop different learning styles. Students might utilize different learning styles as they are introduced into different environments or situations, but they tend to have a preferred learning style that they gravitate to. He identifies four learning

styles: divergers, assimilators, convergers, and accommodators. Each is associated with different way of problem solving. Divergers tend to take a multi-systemic view of situations and generally depend on brainstorming and generating ideas, while assimilators rely on inductive reasoning and the ability to construct theoretical models. Convergers lean primarily on hypothetical-deductive reasoning. However, accomadators execute plans and experiments that adjust immediately to their current situation. The choice of an individual's learning style is a direct reflection of their skills, abilities, learning history, and environment. According to Kolb (1984), learning is more effective when the subject matter is aligned with an individual's preferred learning style.

CRITICAL SERVICE-LEARNING

Critical service-learning first emerged in service-learning literature in 1997 when Robert Rhoads coined the term "critical community service." As the term was integrated into the academic environment, Rice and Pollack (2000) and Rosenberger (2000) introduced the term "critical service learning" that embraces a social justice-oriented approach to traditional community service learning. There are three major components that differentiate critical service learning from traditional service learning. First, in critical service learning there is attention given to social change. So not only do students focus on the outcome of learning skills or concepts, they have the additional goal of bringing about change in the environments that they serve. Helping students see inequalities and social challenges is one element of critical service learning. Second, critical service learning provides the platform for students to question the distribution of power. The critical service learning pedagogy not only identifies the imbalance of power in service relationships but seeks to address the imbalance and identify way that power can be redistributed. Last, there is a focus on developing authentic relationships in the pedagogy

of critical service learning. Critical service learning demands that we acknowledge differences in service relationships, but we must see people as different, but equal. Our differences are avenues that allow us to connect, build allies, create collations, and develop empathy (Collins, 2000).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study was proposed as a result of the emerging problem of retention of African-American students at four-year colleges and universities. Student persistence to degree completion and retention are major factors by which institutions of higher learning, in part, measure their success. When students take an active role in the learning process and are engaged both inside and outside of the classroom, they have larger gains in personal and professional growth and development. After reviewing the literature associated with High Impact Educational Practices that would aid in college retention, focus was directed to the practice of internships. Can internships make a difference in student persistence and retention based on lived experiences of African-American students?

The focus of this study is to capture data from the internship experiences of African-American students to learn how those experiences may impact retention. Research will be conducted on full-time students at the University of Mississippi who declared a business or applied science major. The overall aim is to draw on their experiences and their perspective to identify gaps, determine needs, and further identify the relationship that internships potentially have on the retention of African-American students. By examining the internship experiences of African-American students at the University of Mississippi, institutions can develop stronger internship programs, internship opportunities, and access to internships for African-American students.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Completion Rate: Six-year graduation rates for first-time, full-time students who began seeking a bachelor's degree.

Cooperative Education: A structured method of combining classroom-based education with practical work experience. A cooperative education experience, commonly known as a "co-op," provides academic credit for structured job experience.

High Impact Educational Practice: Techniques and designs for teaching and learning that have proven to be beneficial for student engagement and successful learning among students from many backgrounds.

Internship: An official or formal program paid or unpaid to provide practical experience for beginners in an occupation or profession.

National Association of Colleges and Employer (NACE): A professional association for colleges and employers that set benchmarks for the field.

Persistence: Continuing education to degree completion.

Practicum: A graduate level course, often in a specialized field of study, that is designed to give students supervised practical application of a previously or concurrently studied theory.

Retention: The outcome of how many students remained enrolled from fall to fall. This number is typically derived from first-time, full-time traditional day students but can be applied to any defined cohort.

METHODS

This exploratory qualitative study utilized interviews to gain an understanding of the experiences of African-American students during the internship process. This study gave a voice to African-American undergraduate students whose counter-narratives identified the personal and institutional factors that encouraged or impeded their retention, persistence, overall academic success. The use of qualitative research is crucial to determine what African-American students identify as the personal and professional factors that promote or hinder their persistence and retention because it allows their narrative to construct the theoretical understanding of the academic experiences of color students of color.

Using a purposeful sampling strategy, ten students, representing two academic schools, were recruited via email and selected from the University of Mississippi School of Business and School of Applied Sciences. These schools were selected because they are two of the largest schools at the University of Mississippi and have a large number of African-American students enrolled in them. Their academic majors included social work, management, finance, and marketing. The gender distribution was four males and six females ranging in age from 21 to 38 years old. Some of the student resided on campus, while others were commuters. The sample included first-generation college students, as well second generation collegians. Personally, students were at various stages of life, with some being spouses, parents and others still being supported by their families.

Founded in 1917, the University of Mississippi School of Business offers a bachelor's degree in eleven majors. Only the general business degree requires an internship. Students may receive academic credit for internships if the internships satisfy the accreditation of the School of Business. Interns are evaluated by the school's coordinator of Career Preparation and Internships.

The School of Applied Sciences was established in 2001 and includes the departments of Communication Sciences and Disorders; Nutrition and Hospitality Management; Health, Exercise Science, and Recreation Administration; Legal Studies; and Social Work. The School of Applied Sciences has eight undergraduate majors. All majors require an internship to be supervised by a faculty member. Internship opportunities are promoted by the University of Mississippi Career Center and faculty and staff in each academic school. Students were purposefully selected to participate in the study because of their internship experiences in their respective fields of study. The researcher explored the lived experiences through interviews that captured qualitative data. Students were asked initial questions and responses were recorded.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What challenges do African-American students perceive they face in completing internships?
2. What are the perceptions of African-American students about internships? What kind of challenges do they face?

Interviews took place during the Fall 2017 academic semester. Interviewees were made aware of the purpose of the study in October 2017 by e-mail. With the assistance of the internship site coordinators, those who are selected to participate during the month of November

were asked to complete a consent form (Appendix A). Participants were asked several semi structured interview questions (Appendix B), and encouraged to answer each question openly and honestly. The researcher recorded each interview and took notes. Each open-ended interview was transcribed verbatim, and themes were identified and presented.

Each interview took place in a department office on the University of Mississippi campus. Using the designed interview protocol, study participants were asked a series of question with some follow up questions. The data collected were transcribed, analyzed and categorized based on themes, patterns or noteworthy properties that emerged from the data. The researcher got a general sense of the ideas presented by the subjects during their interview experience. The researcher wrote a detailed description of the lived experiences of participants in the findings. Based on participant response, the data was coded to identify emerging themes. The researcher validated the results with the participants to compare with their experiences for clarity. Co-authors verified the data and themes that have been observed to validate results. Results will be presented in the findings section.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Theme 1: Acquiring internships. Statements from participants' interviews indicated that they acquired internships with the assistance of faculty and staff, through on-line resources, by attending Career and Internship Fairs sponsored by the university, through utilizing the Career Center, by reaching out directly to agencies, and networking with professional organizations. Specifically, 80% of participants indicated that they worked with a university faculty or staff member whose job had a function to assist students with acquiring internships. One student's interview response indicated that he felt that he acquired his internship because of the encouragement of his instructor:

Well, I went to the career fair at the University of Mississippi at the suggestion of my teacher, and while I was there, as you know, I was going to different tables, talking to different people and when I approached Target, they were like, "Hey, you seem like a good fit," because when we had a conversation it was like I was actually telling them about different developmental processes and stuff like that. And they were like, "You might be a good fit for our program. Would you like to interview for it?" And after being prepped by the Career Center at the University of Mississippi and after that I interview with Target and was offered it" (personal communication, November 15, 2017).

Similarly, another student's interview indicated that she felt that she was able to acquire an internship easily with the help of a faculty member:

Okay. Well, in the fields class, the teacher told us...Basically, she gave us a manual of what we needed to look at, different locations and stuff. I just started calling places that I was interested in. I kind of went kind of late because she told us late. I really wanted to do my first one in a hospital, but I wasn't able to do it. I end up calling several places. I mean, several. A lot of people were like, "No, we don't really do internships during the summer," or, "It's not a lot going on." I ended up calling General Hospital in Water Valley. They set up an interview and everything. It was a little hard to get in touch with them at first because the person I went through, but that's how I got the job (personal communication, November 15, 2017).

One finance major who successfully acquired and completed two internships attributes his success in acquiring them to the staff at the Career Center:

I had two internships while I was at school. I had an internship with Enterprise Rent-A-Car. And then I was fortunate enough to get an internship with Wells Fargo. Through both of those internships I partnered with the career center. They notified me. One, there was a career fair. I was able to meet April McClung at Enterprise Rent-A-Car to begin that internship. Then next year's, heading into my senior year, Wells Fargo was conducting some interviews in the career center and I saw some postings. It might have been an email blast regarding some interviews for Wells Fargo. So I came to those, I came to interview and was fortunate enough to be selected for the internship (personal communications November 20, 2017).

Although, the responses primarily pointed to university faculty and staff assistance as to how students acquired internships, other students indicated that they found internships on their own:

Okay. You know I was a part of NABA, the National Association of Black Accountants, and at one of their meeting, KPMG was there with the recruiter. I talked to her at the end of the meeting, and she gave me a form to fill out to go to a leadership conference. So I went to that leadership conference and while I was there I interviewed for my first internship and then she gave me the offer (personal communication, November 17, 2017).

One social work student utilized the Career Center's website and online resources to find an internship:

I obtained my internship through looking online, going through University of Mississippi website, just trying to figure out the process of how do I get in contact with the social work supervisor in order to get the internship (personal communications, November 15, 2017).

The selected examples indicate that most students acquired internships with the help of university faculty and staff. Classroom instructors and faculty were vital to students finding internships and getting prepared to interview for internships. Many students worked closely with a professional staff or faculty members that held the roll of "internship coordinator" or "internship site- supervisor." Most of the students utilized the university Career Center, by

attending career fairs or receiving help with interview preparation. For other students, networking is what provided them the opportunity to acquire an internship.

Theme 2: Challenges students faced during the internship process.

Participants indicated that they experienced challenges in three areas: acquiring an internship, living expenses, and work environment. Even with the assistance of faculty and staff, it was difficult for many students to acquire an internship. Locating internship opportunities was just a part of the problem. Many students found challenges in the application process. They had to navigate company websites and make sure that job search correspondence was adequate. Many indicated that they had to complete multiple applications and received few interviews. Some students found it very difficult to find affordable housing, especially during short summer months in major cities. Also, many of the students noted that the expense of having reliable transportation pressed an additional burden for them. For the majority of participants (90%), the work environment presented the greatest challenge. Many students had to get used to working full-time work hours in a professional environment. Being able to communicate effectively with colleagues from very diverse backgrounds left many students afraid and intimidated. Learning technical jargon and terminology in the workplace created anxiety and nervousness for many students as well.

One student's comments during her internship demonstrates her struggle making the transition:

I think one was 'cause you know how Yalobusha County is kind of a racist county when I was in the transportation service and going to a lady house, she was just basically, "Okay, y'all not coming in, and get off my porch before I sic my dogs up on you (personal communication, November 15, 2017).

Another student's interview captured the student's many challenges thorough the internship process:

My main challenge was finding an internship that either paid or paid for housing if it was away from the Oxford area. So really, location-wise was probably the real problem, because there weren't really any real internship possibilities available in the town that I was in college in (personal communication, November 17, 2017).

One social work student found it hard to manage her emotions during the process:

Working with CPS, I think my biggest challenge was being able ... not be emotional, not being biased towards the client, because everyone coming in, they have different stories and you probably wondered, like, "How can you allow this to happen to your child?", and such and such. So I would say not being biased (personal communications, November 15, 2017).

Further evidence of Theme 2 is demonstrated in the one student's interview:

When you're at school you always think that you're gonna come out of school and be a Senior Vice President of some company and make \$85,000. So I think the biggest

challenge for me and a lot of students is understanding that internships, entry level positions and things of that nature, are going to be stepping stones to get you where you want to get. So the biggest challenge for me was the welcome to reality (personal communication, November 17, 2017).

The examples above demonstrate that many students faced challenges during the internship process. While all the students completed the internship process, 70% reported that acquiring the internship was a challenge, 50% indicated that housing and transportation was a problem and 90% found challenge to adjusting to the work environment whether it be working full-time hours, learning the job responsibilities or working with people of different, ages, races or backgrounds.

One student's struggles were captured in the interview:

At the university, one of the directors of the Career Center was very helpful. I had a mentor that was able to guide me to do things, to help me make better decisions than what I was use to making. With the internship, I didn't want to take it because I knew that I didn't have anywhere to live at, it meant I was still staying in school housing at Oxford. I knew that my vehicle wasn't very reliable at all, so there were mornings that I had to call Uber. There were nights that I had to get a hotel room, and that was out of my budget but it was just things that I had to do to ensure that I accomplished that first goal, which was to finish the internship. I had to go about things the right way, and these are just real life challenges of "the adult world". Challenges that people deal with every day, but when you're still in college and you think of an internship, you don't really dig that

deep into it. Like I said, those were actually the times that I actually had the faith, and they prepared me for that I'm trying to make senior year to be more responsible, more disciplined and even after graduation to go back and remember those challenges that I had to deal with and to know how to overcome those challenges (personal communication, November 19, 2017).

Theme 3: Benefits from the internship experience.

Evidence from student interview responses and researcher observations demonstrates that student received great benefits from their internship experiences. The most prevalent recorded benefit was gaining the understanding of what it meant to be a professional and gaining professional skillsets. Data suggests that students were able to learn professionalism from having it modeled to them by full-time employees and also being able to learn and apply new skills in a real work environment.

The follow interview response shows how this student grew personally and professionally:

During the internship, that professionalism was just something that here and there, a manager would say, "Hey, try to do this instead of that," or "Hey, wear this instead of that." Those little things begin to add up and add up and add up until the point where I really felt that the second phase of the internship, I didn't feel like a junior in college. I felt like an executive for Target, one of the largest corporations in America. It stayed that way because once you get that experiences and you feel that "That's what I'm supposed

to do and this is what I'm going to have to do moving forward," and it kind of just sticks with you; it's not just something that you really lose or don't really understand. All that potential and those skills were embedded in me and helped me to move into my profession (personal communication, November 17, 2017).

In one interview, a student expressed his internship experience helped him as a person and develop as a leader:

Personally, it helped me just to realize that challenges come, there's always going to be bumps in the road, but you have to find ways to stay positive and not lose your joy, and to be able to overcome those challenges. Like I've spoken on before, transportation, living, just the financial piece altogether, because obviously as an intern you are not going to make as much as you would in the actual management position, but there are different things you have to face. It makes you a stronger individual, it makes you think things through, think differently. If I had A and B, I was able to dig deep to find C and D because of the life lessons I learned through that internship. On a professional level, coming in as a junior in college and you realize when they say executive intern they really mean executive intern, so you have the power to come in as a manager. The team is listening to you, they're following your directions, they're trying to relate to you, so at that point you have to grow up fast. This isn't filing papers. A lot of times you take internships for granted, we think you're just setting and coping and filing papers, but internships are very, very, very important. You actually have several roles. You have job duties (personal communication, November 20, 2017).

Further evidence supports the finding that the internship experience helped students gain communication skills with people from different backgrounds. The following interview response demonstrates that a student learned to communicate and work with people from diverse backgrounds and learn to lead them:

It helped me by knowing how to interact with people from different demographics and ages. So for instance, I had team members who were 50, 60 years old and I also has team members who were my age and also younger. So I had to know how to basically be leader, but at the same time...It was kind of difficult, because we don't say boss, but to be over someone who is old enough to be your parent, and they did not like taking criticism and instruction from someone who was very much younger than them (personal communication, November 17, 2017).

The comments above accentuate examples of how student grow personally and professionally during the internship experience. Another topic captured in their responses was how the internship experience afforded them the opportunity to overcome adversity and immerge as better people.

During the interviews, there were many instance where the participants state that they grew as professionals during the course of the internships. Data indicated that students were motivated to complete college to get into the workforce. During one interview one student discussed her internship experience and how it impacted her desire to complete college, "It was just motivation. I was ready to work, and I knew I need to get on out and get my degree in order

to start working” (personal communication, November 15, 2017). Another student made a similar comment on how the internship process motivated her to complete her degree, “A long four years. I was just ready to get through it. I’m just ready to get my diploma” (personal communication, November 16, 2017). This student seemed to express a sincere desire to get through college. Her facial expression told a story of complete elation at being so close to completing college.

Additional evidence shows that the internship process motivated students to complete their education. The following example demonstrates how the internship helped one student to be motivated to complete college and be prepared for the workforce:

Yeah, I would say I was already done with school, so I was like, “Okay, if I just finish this internship, I’m gonna be done.” Internships are good because as soon as you finish school, you get to go out there and you get to show those skills off. You get to utilize what you have learned. Then, you’re finally finished. I would definitely say my internship really helped me. Like I said, I grew individually, I grew working with people, and I grew my knowledge. I still have relationships to this day with my supervisor that I worked my internship with. I would definitely say, “Yeah my internship impacted my desired to complete college and be a social worker” (personal communication, November 16, 2017).

In another interview one student’s comment captured not only her personal internship experience, but her perception of the experience of African-Americans in general:

It just pushed me forward because it just gave me a sense like okay, beat those stereotypes. ‘Cause often times we all are looked at like, oh we don’t even think about it, we not, blacks are not...I’m not going to say it aloud, but just think about how well back in the day, we weren’t even able to go here (Ole Miss), so just to come here and just push me forward. And also just, my mom always instilled education in me. And so that just pushed me like okay, yeah, ‘cause I actually work there too. So just to know this is not why I just want to be in my career, I always want to go further and always wanted more for myself (personal communication, November 17, 2017).

One student felt that his internship affirmed his career choice and motivated him to complete college:

Obviously, it gets rough, there’s time when you feel like, “I’m working too many hours...there’s not enough this, not enough payroll, etc., etc.,” but at the end of the day nobody is extremely ecstatic about their job every day, but if you’re proud to say what you’re doing, who you’re doing it for, then you’re probably doing the right thing. I realize that no matter the company, I want to be in retail management. It’s what I love to do, and the internship really cleared that up for me because I was obviously flying all over the place. I didn’t know exactly what I wanted to do, but the internship, that opportunity, definitely gave me the confirmation that this is what I wanted to do moving forward with my career.

It was a different type of maturity my senior year. It can me the drive and the vision. It gave me the drive and that vision. I took classes in the fall, I took classes in the winter and spring, in May intersession, I took classes in the summertime, and I took classes in August. I literally took classes for every single semester all the way up until it was time for me to start with Target. I knew if had that degree, I could go do that job I did with the internship. That desire, that drive really came from that experience I had with the internship (personal communications, November 20, 2018).

Again, these examples show that the internship experiences help students not only grow as professionals, but through engaging in the workplace also helps them apply classroom knowledge that fosters a desire complete college. The internship process gives them the structure that they need to thrive, the professionalism they need to model, and the motivation they need to grow. The internship experience broadens their perspective, increases their network, and gives them real life experience that is vital in their professional development.

Theme 4: Advice to future students entering internships.

To understand the importance of support, I explored the importance of the role of current African-American students that have completed internships offering guidance and suggestions to future students who aspired to complete internships. During the interviews, participants were asked what advice they would give to other students planning to go through the internship process. Their responses indicate that their role was important in preparing future students to go through the process and they could provide useful information, one student stated, “Before I

started my internship, someone told me that you're more prepared than you think you are, and I think that's great advice" (personal communication, November 16, 2017).

Another respondent immediately offered sound advice:

I would say be on time, every day is a different day, nothing is the same, so be prepared for the worst. You may stay longer than expected. Keep up with your schoolwork, for an internship, keep up with your papers. Don't procrastinate, because it's a lot. So you have to keep up with your work (personal communication, November 17, 2017).

One student felt that communication was the key to a successful internship experience:

Well the advice that I would give them with that particular question would definitely be not to be scared and to make sure that you communicate with your intern supervisor. I would definitely say when a person goes into an internship, make sure you communicate with your intern supervisor. Allow them to know what you want to get out of this, what you're not comfortable with, and ask questions. The only stupid question is the one not asked. In order to for you to learn something, you have to be asking questions. I made sure I did a lot of that. I would definitely say make sure you communicate with them, make sure you ask questions, and make sure you just see what they need from you (personal communication, November 17, 2017).

A social work student offered the following advice to student planning to intern:

I think something that might be helpful, that it may seem like it's a lot, but it's actually worthwhile. After a while, things that you might find challenging at first will come easier over time (personal communication, November 15, 2017).

A marketing student provided sound guidance for peers considering taking on an internship:

Yeah, like I said with internships in general, students should just make sure they're not just listening to their friends or to the rumors. Internships are serious. You can look at it like a practice, a practice before you actually have the game. The game is when you graduate and you straight into it. It's harder than we think as students. We think, "Oh, we'll go to work and pay a few bills," but the adult life, it's a serious thing. The internship is just preparing you for that. It's preparing you for to have the discipline to get up and be at work every morning at eight o'clock. If you have an eight o'clock class, you can easily not go. You can't not go to work, so it puts that discipline in you. You know you can't go to work with jeans on or with Nike shorts, you have to get up and put what you need to put on. You've got to know how you can and can't address people. You know about everything that comes with actually maturing and being an adult and living the adult life, it's taught through internships and it'll prepare you. Even going through your senior year, you will see an incredible, just an amazing turnaround with your personality, with the way you think, the decisions you make, and it disciplines you well if you take advantage of an internship.

These examples represent typical responses from study participants. Their responses indicate that the internship experience, while very beneficial, can present great challenges to interns. Additionally, through the internship experience students developed the skills to be professionals and the desire to complete college and enter the world of work. The students gained confidence through the internship experience and have great advice for future students going through the process.

DISCUSSION

This research study had two objectives. The first was to get a greater understanding of the challenges that African-American students face completing the internship process. This qualitative measure was captured during semi-structured interviews and researcher field notes. The second objective was to explore the perceptions of African-American students about their internship experiences, challenges that they faced, and how those experiences may impact retention. This qualitative measure was captured during semi-structured interviews and researcher field notes. The Data Analysis section presented the results of the qualitative analysis reporting the results related to the study objectives and two research questions.

This section will complete the investigation of the African-American students' internship experiences by discussing the results in the context of the existing literature and theoretical framework. As presented in the literature review, there are great challenges in the educational experiences for African-American students. Many feel isolated disconnected, and disenfranchised (Tinto, 2012), so greater institutional support is needed to retain minority students. In the literature I reviewed, Tinto encourages student engagement in and out of the classroom and student support programs to promote student success. There was a consensus according to the social integration model (Tinto, 1975, 1993) and involvement model (Astin 1977), student retention and persistence to degree completion should be enhanced by students completing internships. Research Question 1 explores African-American students' perception of the challenges that they face in completing internships. Research Question 2 explores African-

American students' perception of about internships and the challenges they faced during their internship experiences.

Research Question 1. Research Question 1 asked, *What challenges do African-American students perceive they face in completing internships?* To inform this research question, qualitative data was considered. This consisted of interview transcripts and researcher field notes. Specifically, in accordance with the complimentary methodology, I used the data to inform the question in distinct ways. My analysis of the data suggests that (a) African-American students experienced challenges in locating internships (b) African-American students experienced difficulty in securing internships (c) African-American students found challenges in completing internships.

Evidence suggests that participants in the African-American Internship Experience engaged in elements of the academic and social integration model framework used in this study. Perhaps one of the most distinct examples of this is Theme 1, Acquiring internships. This finding is important because the ability of African-American students to find and secure an internship is closely linked to thoroughly understanding the process and utilizing community for student success. Much of the literature regarding meaningful learning experience suggests that students engaging with their cohort usually make a greater investment in their education and persist to graduation (Tinto, 1993).

Locating, securing, and completing an internship may be seen as the student's ability to utilize resources and community, and take theories and classroom concepts into real-life practice. The support of faculty, staff, peers, and university resources are crucial to students having success in finding and securing an appropriate internship. The following interview question response indicates the student recognized the benefit of support in the process:

I had two internships while I was at school. I had an internship with Enterprise Rent-A-Car and then I was fortunate enough to get an internship with Wells Fargo. Through both of those internships, I partnered with the career center. They notified me. One, there was career fair. I was able to meet April McClung at Enterprise Rent-A-Car to begin that internship. Then next year, heading into my senior year, Wells Fargo was conducting some interviews in the career center and I saw some postings. It might have been an e-mail blast regarding some interviews for Wells Fargo. So I came to those, I came to interview and was fortunate enough to be selected for the internship (personal communication, November 20, 2017).

In this example, the student demonstrates awareness of utilizing university resources in acquiring two internships. He was a student in a Career and Life Planning class and was made aware of the importance of networking, the skills required to network, where to network, and how develop his job search correspondence. The class also discussed how to conduct an effective job search and interview skills. Tinto's (2012) research includes the roles of students, faculty and staff as equal stakeholders in student engagement in and out of the classroom.

Another finding from this research suggests that the struggles African-American students faced during internships were primarily related to finances and communication. Theme 2, *Challenges students faced during the internship process* denotes, that major challenges for students were (a) adequate transportation (b) afford housing during internship and (c) finances to manage living expenses. Participants indicated that some opportunities had to be passed on because they could not afford to travel to locations in other areas of the country. Many also indicated that even with a paid internship, finding affordable housing for a short term was next to nearly impossible in many of the cities where the internships were available. Still some found

that the living expenses associated with working in a professional environment were overwhelming. Having professional attire and reliable transportation were at the top of the list. These findings and students' reported feelings of anxiety and frustration are in line with much of the academic literature. Hunn (2014) stated there are additional challenges to remove the barriers that are hindering minority groups when developing their education and exposing them to rich learning experiences and exposure to diverse environments.

Another finding from this research suggests that the struggles experienced by African-American students were primarily related to adjusting to the work environment. This finding is in line with relevant academic literature. As presented in Theme 2, students discussed the difficulty in adjusting to a full-time work professional work environment. Students had to adjust to the long hours, consistently dressing in professional attire, and learning to effectively communicate with people from very diverse backgrounds. Cook and Pettijohn (2004) noted that students found that internships helped them work with diverse groups of people in various different settings.

Conclusion. Data from qualitative data sources and themes 1 and 2 help to inform research question 1. Specifically, to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges African-American students faced in completing an internship. I observed the students' struggles and successes. Students struggled in the area of acquiring an internship. Many students were not sure of how to go through the search and application process. Several stated their internship searching skills, their resumes and cover letters, and their interviewing skills were not adequate. Many students also, struggled with basic living expense: transportation, housing, and clothing. Transitioning to a professional work environment presented a challenge for many students as well. Long hours, technical jargon, and being able to relate to diverse groups presented some

barriers. Students were most successful when they had regular communication with a site supervisor or internship coordinator. Internships with more structure, clear expectations, and measurable outcomes fostered an environment where more students succeeded.

Research Question 2. Research question 2 asks, *What are the perceptions of African-American students about internships? What kind of challenges do they face?* To inform this research question qualitative data from interview transcripts and researcher field notes are utilized together. Specifically, in line with the methodology, I used the data sources to inform the question in specific ways. My analysis of the data suggests that (a) African-American students attain a higher level of professional growth from the internship experiences, (b) African-American students' internship experiences increase their desire to complete college, (c) African-American students who completed internships could serve as mentors and provide advice to other African-American students desiring to complete internships.

Data supports that the internship experience is critically important to the professional growth and development of African-American students. Perhaps one of the most evident examples of this is Theme 3, Benefits from the internship experience. This finding is important because the ability of African-American students to make the transition from the world of academia to world of work is enhanced by the internship experience. Much of the literature regarding internships suggests that interns provide employers a stronger selection of future employees and a low-cost recruiting method. In effect the internship process helps to prepare the student for the career, while allowing the employer to vet the interns and reduce the cost associated with turnover (Divine, 2007).

Gaining an understanding of realistic expectations is an important part of self-actualization. During the internship process students must be able to engage in effective

communication, rely on critical thinking skills, and utilize analytical reasoning skills to maximized the experience. The following interview response demonstrates that students grasped this idea:

It helped me just life experiences, meeting different people, was probably the biggest thing, I think personally. Being exposed to people I probably normally wouldn't have been exposed to, and professionally, just experience and growth and that perspective (personal communication, November 15, 2017).

In this example, the student demonstrates the importance of communication skills and the benefits associated with working in a diverse environment. They were aware of the valuable benefits afforded to them from the internship, opportunities they might not have received otherwise. Consequently, in many cases, students were also aware that their future success was linked to the skillsets that they developed and the professional and social networks that were created organically. Literature is growing around the idea that internships in higher education greatly impacts career development skills and should be a requirement for degree completion.

Cook and Pettijohn (2004) suggested that social benefits of the internship experience not on personal grow, but also honed skills that were essential for personal growth as well.

Another example of the participants' awareness of the need to build communication skills was very evident in the interviews. On social work student discussed her struggle to learn the terminology and her lack of familiarity with the department. This caused her to doubt her competence and increased her level of anxiety. After seeking the help of her site supervision and talking with her peers, she was given the encouragement and reassurance that she needed to proceed.

The second finding to inform Research Question 2 is very apparent in Theme 3, *Benefits from the Internship Experience*, as well. In the literature framework, students who engage in the High Impact practice of internships have a greater level of persistence to degree completion. Data analysis indicate that students were more clear about their career path after the internship and were more motivated to complete their degree and enter the world of work. Additionally, qualitative analysis indicated the internship experience helped to clarify participants' career paths. Most found that the experience confirmed the career choice and left them motivated and excited about starting their career, while others learned a lot from the experience, but decided to take another career direction at the end of the internship. However, those that chose to change their career path reported that they learned many transferable skills.

One statement from the interview demonstrates the personal nature of a business student's internship experience:

The internship experience really helped me grow as a leader, but also, with the specific internship, it helped me realize that I really did not want to work in the retail business, because there's so much that goes into that business. But they ask for much, but it didn't give me as much as I wanted to for what they ask for and the possibilities to advance in the business, well, and the company took at least six to eight years, so it wasn't a good turnover, in my opinion (personal correspondence, November 20, 2017).

This example is representative of other students' responses that show how their experience helped them to clarify their career choice.

Furthermore, as I will discuss later, students with a clearer career path, have greater retention rate in college as well as greater persistence to degree completion. The students in this study left their internships highly motivated to finish the coursework and enter the workforce. The struggles they faced were real, but the success they enjoyed allowed them to envision a bright future. This is in line with the research building on the literary framework of student retention. Astin (1993) spoke to how beneficial the homogeneous and supportive environment is especially beneficial to the success of racial and ethnic minorities in their degree completion.

The final element of the literature framework is peer support and is informed by the qualitative results of the participant interviews and researcher field notes. Theme 4 found that, students have advice to future students entering internships. Student support is crucial to other students having a successful internship experience. Many students noted that they often asked other student interns how to perform different duties or job functions. Similar to a classroom setting many felt comfortable relying on their peers for clarity on some assignments. Other students noted that before they started their internship they sought other student's advice on how to prepare and what to expect. Data indicated that students were not only willing to share information and advice about their internship experiences, many suggested that it would be very beneficial for students to speak with past interns before selecting an internship. Still other stated the primary reason that they choose their internship was they had a friend that had been an intern with the same organization and suggested they apply.

I believe the student's struggle with during internships can be linked to their lack of preparation and lack of knowing what to expect. From many African-American students the

college environment presented a challenge, however, entering the workplace presented an even greater challenge. Students, who are accustomed to shorts, backpacks, and flip-flops, found a culture of suits, slack, briefcases, and wingtips a major adjustment. However, the more support they received from peers helped them to navigate through the corporate landscape. Existing literature discussed the significance of peer support in the learning environment. In one study Tinto (1993) noted that student engagement inside and outside the classroom was vital to establishing community and meaningful learning experiences to strengthen retention and heighten persistence of college students.

Conclusion. Data from qualitative data sources and Themes 3 and 4 help to inform Research Question 2. Specifically, I looked at students' path as they transition and adjusted to their work setting and how they developed skills and relationships during their internships. Students learned how to network and effectively communicate with peers, colleagues, faculty, and supervisors. Engaging in these meaningful experiences created new skills, promoted a greater sense of professionalism, and increased their motivation to complete college and enter the world of work. Overtime they mastered challenges and built on their success to be professionals in their respective disciplines. The students' internship success was instrumental and greatly linked to their self-concept. While the interviews examined the student's individual experience, my observations conclude that the student's experiences are linked to the larger community and their individual experience impacts the corporate experience.

CONCLUSION

African-American students not persisting to graduation is a major problem in higher education today. It is an educational battle that must be won. The challenge is for colleges and universities to find effective ways to increase retention of the historically underserved. My goal with the study is to use the high impact practice of internships to assist on winning the war on retention. The voices and stories of the participants in this study will give a clearer understanding of the internship experiences of African-American students and how they may be used to increase persistence to degree completion.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The outcomes of this action research project, overall, informs my initial purpose to explore: (a) the challenges African-American students perceive they face in completing internships (b) the perceptions of African-American students about internships, and (c) capture data from the internship experiences of African-American students and note how those experiences may impact retention. As a career services professional internships are seen as an important tool by faculty, staff, and students to successfully prepare for the workforce. Results from this study inform practice in several ways, I have identified and discussed the three most significant here.

Structure of Internship Search Process. In this study, each student had to secure an internship on their own. This process seemed to be quite stressful to the majority of students. Several students reported that they struggled with the search process, the application process, and the interview process. This is an important discover, because assistance was readily available, but students were unaware of the resources. The small percentage that utilized the career center seemed to be less stressed and seemed to benefit from the assistance. When considering support, several students indicated some instructors assisted them in the process. Many of the students in the study indicate that their work schedule or class schedule prohibited them for utilizing career services or meeting with a professor to get help securing an internship. At the end of their

internship experience participants had a better understanding of the process and some were considering another internship and a few others were in the process of completing a second internship. Faculty and Career Center staff may be able to help African-American students understand the internship search process more clearly by offering an orientation that walks student through the process. This could be accomplished by offering an online orientation that could be embedded in the curriculum of the academic course work, offered as an assignment in a first year experience class, or marketed directly to student organizations that are heavily comprised of African-American students ie. Black Student Association, Panhellenic Greek organizations, and professional Black Student Organizations.

From my observations and experience, students greatly benefit from working with career center professionals on job search correspondence, interviewing skills, and current technology and resources to locate internships. Faculty, while very adept at subject matter, sometimes are not as skilled in the latest job search technology, interviewing skills, and structure of correspondence. A collative effort between career services and faculty may product greater support for students and centralized the process.

Peer Education Program (PEP). As demonstrated, African-American students in this study were very open about their experiences during their internships. They were honest about their feelings, challenges, and their accomplishments. Many stated that they heard about their internship from a friend or a friend shared with them some lessons they learn from their internship experience. The participants in this study were a wealth of information and readily willing to give advice to other students considering internships. One means that this could be

accomplished is by creating a Peer Education Program (PEP). The program could be comprised of students who had completed an internship serving as educational ambassadors to other students who were considering their options. This could be done virtually through an existing platform like LinkedIn that includes a profile picture where a PEP group could be created and students could identify their peers based on their major or internship choices. Students who were interested in inquiring could direct message PEP group members for information or set up a time to call if they had more detailed questions. Also, each semester PEP group members could serve on a panel during a career-related event and students could be invited to come or instructors could bring their classes who were in the internship exploration process. PEP group members who graduate could be encouraged to continue to participate by career center staff and faculty to strengthen networking opportunities for students and recruiting efforts for employers.

Internship Travel or Housing Stipend. One of the greatest implications of this research is the impact it may have on my own practice. I have worked with countless students to assist them with acquiring internships. I am presently working with students at two universities with several branch campuses and I find the issues are nearly the same. Two major concerns of today's students when selecting internships are the cost of housing during the internship and the cost of travel associated with the internship. Not to mention the day-to-day expenses associated with working every day. After completing the study, I considered what could be done to assist the students with their expenses, because far too many students give up great internship opportunities or struggle financially trying to complete an internship. In the nature of my work there are a few departmental review streams. Career fairs can generate thousands of dollars, there are corporate sponsorships, and there are fundraising opportunities. While most of the funds created

by these subsidize the budget and fill spending gaps, some of the funds can be utilized to create travel or housing stipends for students who are in need. A set number of stipends can be established with limited award amounts and students could apply based on their need. A review committee comprised of career center professional and faculty could meet and review applications and awards could be given annually. Additionally, if substantial funds were generated an endowment could be established and the stipend program could be self-sufficient.

LIMITATIONS

The primary limitation of this study was the small sample size. Another limitation is that this study was conducted at one, public, predominantly white research institution and interviews were conducted with students in only two academic schools. The interview questions were developed by a researcher with biases toward the value of internships in the professional development of students. Attempts were made to preserve the integrity of the interview process and the reliability of the interview data; however, the possibility for bias cannot be completely eliminated. Given the methodological approach and sample size, findings cannot be generalized to other academic schools or other institutions, however, they can provide insight regarding the similarities and differences of African-American students' educational experiences with peers at this and other institutions that can help implement practices that increase retention and persistence.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERNSHIP STUDY INFORMATION SHEET

Title: The African-American Internship Experience

Investigator

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The University of TN at Martin
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Advisor

Neal Hutchens, Ph.D.,J.D.
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The University of Mississippi
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INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING ONLY IF YOU ARE COLLECTING DATA EXCLUSIVELY FROM ADULTS

By checking this box I certify that I am 18 years of age or older.

Description

This study is proposed as the result of the emerging problem of retention of African-American students at four year colleges and universities. The purpose of this research project is to capture data from the internship experiences of African-American students to learn how those experiences may impact retention. We would like to ask you a few questions about your experience. You will not be required to give your name or other identifying information.

Compensation

It will take you approximately 30-40 minutes to complete this interview. For your participation your name will be entered into a drawing for a \$25-dollar gift card.

Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks in taking participating in this focus group. Many people find it is an enjoyable experience participating in focus groups.

Confidentiality

You will be assigned a code name and no identifiable information will be recorded, therefore we do not think you can be identified from this study.

Right to Withdraw

You are not required to participate in the study. If at any point you feel that you want to stop, you can. You can notify the Mark McCloud or Neal Hutchens by phone, in person or by letter (contact information listed above). You may also skip any questions you prefer not to answer.

IRB Approval

This study has been reviewed by The University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). If

you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a participant of research, please contact the IRB at (662) 915-7482 or irb@olemiss.edu.

Statement of Consent

I have read and understand the above information. By completing the interview, I consent to participate in the study.

APPENDIX B

African-American Internship Experience Internship Experience Interview Questions

I: How did you obtain this internship?

A:

I: Did you face any challenges in obtaining an internship?

A:

I: What goals did you have at the start of your internship? How did you achieve your goals?

A:

I: What challenges did you face during your internship?

A:

I: How did your internship help you affirm your career choice?

A:

I: How did your internship experience help you grow personally and professionally?

A:

I: How did internship experience impact your desire to complete college?

A:

I: What is your advice for future students regarding an internship with this organization?

A:

I: Please include any other comments or information that you will feel helpful?

A:

Notes and Observations:

COLLABORATIVE CONCLUSION

COLLABORATIVE CONCLUSION

The authors of this companion study sought to establish the relevancy of engagement practices on the academic success of underserved student populations, specifically, first-generation and African American students. To do so, each author carried out separate research studies exploring unique engagement strategies and their effects on student success. Although each manuscript was distinct, they yielded similar findings in the quest to improve the academic achievement of underserved students through engagement.

Through conduction of the three studies, it was understood that a supportive campus environment, peer support and faculty/staff support are all of the utmost importance in the pursuit of positively influencing the success of first-generation and African American students.

Our research showed that students found benefit from the engagement strategies which lead to their academic success; yet, there were limitations to consider. Each study was performed with a small sample size, which reduces the strength of the claims. Likewise, two of the studies were accomplished at public community colleges and the third at a state university. These two types of institutions by no means encompass the manifold types of post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that the aforementioned engagement approaches are significant to all underserved populations, as first-generation and African American students were the only underserved groups examined.

The discoveries in this companion dissertation are of great worth to higher education practitioners and the nation, alike, as this study brings awareness to the challenges some underserved students face. Not only does this study illuminate insufficiencies in the connectedness of students to institutions and services, but also opportunities to better engage and serve these students that are so vital to the economic growth of the country by being educated and socially mobile. Thus, the authors have concluded upon easy-to-implement, low-cost recommendations for practitioners to apply. The recommendations are the following: faculty/staff training on supporting African American male students, a first-generation college student experience program, and a Peer Mentoring program for African American students.

Faculty/staff support, peer support and a supportive campus environment were common across all three individual studies as being valuable to the success of first-generation and African American students. With that deduction, the researchers propose that institutions incorporate campus-wide, collaborative faculty and staff training focusing on and sharing best practices for engaging, serving and supporting underserved students. Additionally, institutions are encouraged to install peer mentoring programs for underserved students to gain experiences, knowledge and resources from fellow students of similar backgrounds. Finally, the authors suggest that colleges designate personnel to ensure that campus environments remain supportive to underserved students and embody the welcoming and nurturing staff and peer environments that this companion study has observed to be important in cultivating the engagement and success of underserved, but not underestimated, college students.

To implement said recommendations to encourage engagement and the resulting success of African American male students, beginning of the semester staff development trainings should incorporate sessions on intrusive advising and racial biases. Campus-wide awareness and

education on microaggressions can foster improved relationships among staff and minority students. Intrusive advising workshops can be utilized to inform staff of cultural, social, financial, psychological and family issues commonly found to hinder the academic engagement and success of African American male students. Knowledge of such obstacles to academic achievement allows advisors the opportunity to ask intentional questions and work with students to find solutions to problems and available resources. To further ensure positive student-faculty relationships, only advisors having completed a minimum number of intrusive advising and cultural awareness workshops should be assigned as advisors to African American male students.

Another task which should take place early in the semester to promote the achievement of African American male students is the automatic assignment of a mentor to newly registered students. The mentor program should be practiced similar to the academic advising program of an institution; regular meetings to monitor progress, discuss goals, plan courses and recommend resources. Institutions can encourage students, community or staff members to be mentors, who are African American and share similar backgrounds with African American male students.

Another recommendation is a first-generation experience program which could be easily implemented at little or no cost is an option for institutions. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, there are 36% of first-generation college students identified within the community college system in the U.S. (AACC, 2016).

First-generation college students thrive in college when properly encouraged and motivated to pursue their studies. Many first-generation college students are nervous about attending college and do not have social capital as continuing generation college students. Therefore, first-generation college students need the support of their institutions to be successful.

Tinto (2012) suggested that it is important for colleges and universities to take the lead of improving retention efforts to enhance campus climates for underserved groups.

By creating this program, it would help persistence and retention of FGS. This program should be open to traditional and non-traditional students. Your institution may need to consider the definition of FGS that will allow the number of students you wish to serve. For example, if both parents have not attended or graduated from college, the likelihood of more first-generation students being eligible should increase.

After students are identified as first-generation, students should be contacted by a counselor or academic advisor to join the first-generation college experience program. The program should consist of an orientation class to assist with acclimating first-generation students to college. The orientation class can comprise topics of time management, study skills, career building/resume skills, just to name a few. The first-generation college student program may be based on a one semester basis to allow students the opportunity to get to know all of the support services available on campus for them. The program may consist of a tour of the library, financial aid, student union, and/or other Student Affairs departments on campus to serve their needs. Some institutions may already have something in place that can easily be adjusted to accommodate and provide resources to incoming first-generation students.

As revealed in this study, first-generation college students succeed with the proper amount of care and concern from representatives such as faculty and staff on campus. First-generation college students need to know that institutions care and are willing to help them achieve their goals.

This study has multiple implications for both colleges and policy makers as it relates to engagement strategies and their impact on underserved students. More research on the capacity for delivery and reception of engagement strategies is needed to determine their impact on student success. Additional work is needed to implement programs that promote student success by aligning them with appropriate engagement strategies. Furthermore, future research should be continued for institutions providing opportunities for student engagement in the educational environment. Therefore, a final recommendation is to implement a peer mentoring program.

Communication is the key to planning and implementing a peer mentoring program. Effective communication requires conversation with all stakeholders, including faculty, staff, students, and administrators, before implementation of a program. The university should hold regular meetings with all stakeholders to review the internship process and any changes to the departmental requirements. Additionally, quarterly updates should be provided to all stakeholders in individual academic colleges.

Collaboration with faculty, staff, and career services professionals is essential for enhanced student outcomes. Peer mentoring programs benefit from utilizing the services and resources that are provided by the campus career center. Career Development software, career counselors, career databases, and the professional network can assist in the training of peer mentors. Each academic college should provide time and space for faculty and staff to collaborate and ensure that the peer mentor pool is diverse and represents multiple academic disciplines.

Faculty and staff training in the area of internships and experiential learning is crucial as they will have to work closely with Peer Mentors in keeping them aware of current industry trends and other pertinent information. Also, they will be an excellent resource for recruiting

peers and marketing the Peer Mentoring program as a resource for current students. If funding is available, training should be paid as an incentive for faculty and staff to participate. The cost associated with training can be paid with professional development funds or grant funding.

Peer Mentor training should be on-going and high quality so that expectations are clear. They must know their role as a resource for students throughout the internship process from the selection of an internship until its completion. The Peer Mentor role is essential for bridging the gap between faculty's classroom expectations and employer expectations. Peer Mentors should be integrated into the training provided to all peer career educators at the beginning of each semester. Academic colleges should ensure that Peer Mentors are provided with current departmental guidelines. Peer Mentors should be required to attend training sessions.

Marketing the availability of Peer Mentors for internship assistance should be incorporated into the resources that faculty make available to students in their coursework. It may be introduced in introductory courses, internship courses, or capstone courses. Additionally, the Peer Mentoring program can be marketed to student organizations that have a large population of underserved populations such as the following: Black Student Association, National Pan-Hellenic Council, Latino Student Association, etc. Furthermore, Peer Mentors can be marketed through the campus career center on the website under the resources for students tab. Moreover, use of the theoretical framework of this study will enable career center professionals, faculty, and staff to develop strategies to enhance student engagement strategies to impact underserved students.

All of the recommendations and implementations mentioned hitherto can be serviced under the leadership of one staff member who oversees and adjudicates all African American and

first-generation student programming and initiatives to maintain a welcoming, supportive, and engaging learning environment for underserved, but not underestimated, college students.

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VITA

Emily C. Tucker

EDUCATION

The University of Mississippi University, MS

Master of Arts Degree December 2007

Major: Higher Education/Student Personnel

Bachelor of Liberal Arts Degree December 2005

Major: Biology, Minor: Chemistry

EXPERIENCE

Itawamba Community College Fulton, MS

Recruiter/Advisor July 2013 – Present

- Visit high schools to speak with students concerning Itawamba Community College
- Train and manage student recruiters and orientation leaders
- Advise students concerning course selection and graduation/transfer requirements
- Meet with prospective students and parents during campus tours
- Supervise student workers
- Counsel and correspond with prospective students
- Recruit and counsel GED graduates and adult learners

Academic Advisor August 2010 – July 2013

- Advised students concerning course selection and graduation/transfer requirements
- Taught freshman seminar course
- Visited high schools to speak with students concerning Itawamba Community College
- Registered students for classes

The University of Mississippi Tupelo, MS

Regional Admissions Counselor November 2007 – July 2010

- Recruited, counseled, and corresponded with prospective University students
- Represented and promoted the University and provided information about campus offerings
- Advised non-traditional students concerning admission requirements and courses of study
- Visited community colleges to speak with students concerning the University

Office of Financial Aid, The University of Mississippi University, MS

Graduate Assistant August 2006 – November 2007

- Scheduled meetings between Financial Aid Advisors and prospective students

- Assisted staff in managing and documenting student issues, such as prior account balances as well as loan entrance and exit counseling
- Advised students and parents on a walk-in basis regarding financial aid and scholarship issues and questions

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS and COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- Women in Higher Education Mississippi Network(WHEMN)
- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated; Nu Sigma Omega graduate chapter
- Jim Ingram Community Leadership Institute
- Itawamba Community College Leadership Development Institute

COMPUTER SKILLS

- Databases: Banner, ProSAM(Student Aid Management), and SAP(Campus Management)