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# The experiences of African American males on a predominantly white campus

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*Eastern Illinois University*

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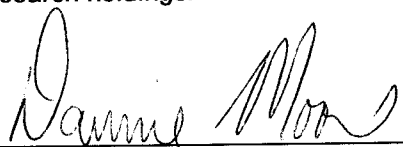
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The Experiences of African American Males on a  
Predominantly White Campus

(TITLE)

BY

Dannie Earl Moore II

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science in College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2006

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
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### Abstract

The purposes of this qualitative study were to evaluate teacher/student relationships between African American male college students and white male professors to ascertain to perceptions of college among African American males on a predominantly white campus. To be considered for participation, each student met the following criteria: (1) in their final year of college, (2) had at least one white male instructor, and (3) African American male. Characteristics such as age, academic degree program, extracurricular involvement, and prior enrollment at another institution were not considered among the selection criteria to protect confidentiality. Results from the present study include the perceptions of college of five African American males enrolled at a predominantly mid-sized white institution in the Midwest.

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my parents,

Dannie E. Moore and Vivian Moore

Your support has been endless as I found my way through college and to adulthood. You have helped me achieve things that people said were impossible of me. You never gave up and your love means the world to me. Thank you for everything.

Your son,

Dannie Earl Moore II

## Acknowledgement

Many people have helped tremendously in the process of completing this project and in helping me make it through graduate school. My passion for research on African American male college students came from seeing so many of my peers not graduate because of bad interactions with professors and a hatred for college at predominantly white institutions. I questioned why my experiences weren't all negative and how I made it so far educationally. It was difficult for me to have to watch so many childhood friends work endless hours to make ends meet to take care of their families, deciding that college was not the way for their life. A lot of people made this project come to life.

I have to first thank God for always giving me the blessings I needed to make it in life. I have seen so much growing up in the "hood" and it is just a blessing at times to be alive.

My high school was Madison University High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I grew up in the inner city of Milwaukee and attended Milwaukee public schools my entire life. As I grew older and made it to high school, I realized I didn't want to stop there and I wanted college in my future. Teachers at my high schools saw it as impossible for me to make it through college. Thanks for telling me 'I couldn't do it,' which has been a motivator for the last six years.

Dr. Fay Akindes, my undergraduate professor and advisor, thanks for always believing in me as a student. From Communication 108 to Senior Seminar, you saw something in me that many people looked past. Thanks for never giving up on students



and always believing in educating students on different cultures. No matter how hard it is never give up, because you are touching the lives of the students at the University of Wisconsin Parkside.

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Doug (Dougie Fresh) Howell, my supervisor, mentor, and friend. You will never understand how great you have been as a supervisor. You helped me see that I could be a great hall director through giving me opportunities to do great things and talking them through with you afterward to assess how they went. You are appreciated. I would also like to thank you for always supporting me academically; it was like two full time jobs and you helped me through it all.

The Cohort, we did it, we all made it together. You have become more than classmates. We are all friends for life. You have been great to take classes with and definitely fun to be around. I love you all and thanks for being so great.

To the best fraternity in the world, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Incorporated, thanks for teaching me what it means to "achieve in any situation." Brothers all over keep achieving.

And finally, to the participants who gave so much time because they wanted the road to be better for African American males in college. As I met with you all, I saw pieces of me. I also saw a fighter that knows an education is the key to success. You will all do great things; keep changing the world.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Black males have become a rare subgroup on college campuses across America (Suggs, 2003). According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2005 Almanac Issue, <http://chronicle.com/weekly/almanac/2005/nation/0102002.htm>, retrieved on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006), 17,000,000 students were enrolled in American colleges and universities in 2004. African Americans comprised 1,978,700 of this figure. Between 1990 and 2004, the number of African American college students grew from 1,247,000 to 1,978,700. The number of black males only increased by 223,900, 30 percent of the total increase in black student enrollment during this 14 year time period. Concomitantly, African American female enrollment increased by 507,900, accounting for 69 percent of the increase in black student enrollment. The increase in African American male enrollment appeared to underscore the perception that black males were becoming a “rare species”. Black males started attending predominately white institutions in record numbers in the 1960’s and outnumbered women during that era.

Enrollment patterns fluctuated over the years and by 1976, black women outnumbered black men among college enrollers. Because male enrollment had dropped considerably by 1980, while female enrollment had risen quite noticeably, black women comprised a larger share of the black college enrollers in 1980 (58 percent) than 1976 (54 percent) (Fennema & Ayers, 1984). In 1980 females made up 5.3 percent of total enrollment in higher education. That same year, black males accounted for only 3.8 percent of the total (Wallace, 1993).

predominantly white institutions. The current study may also help admissions staff members better understand the low matriculation and retention rates for African American males. White male professors may appreciate the problems that African American males have when learning from their teaching styles. According to Powell (2003), stereotypical treatment is something that people are unknowingly conditioned to do and they sometimes can not see what they do as a problem for others. The present project in conjunction with prior research in this area could improve student/teacher relationships on predominantly white campuses as well as help more black males receive a quality education.

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problems of concern for the present study were (1) the classroom experiences and teacher/student relationships of male African American students and male Caucasian faculty members; (2) perceptions of negative and positive classroom experiences; (3) disparate student learning styles and faculty pedagogical styles; and (4) student perceptions of the overall campus climate for African American males.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were developed by the researcher and guided the present study.

1. What is the overall treatment of black male students by white male professors?
2. To what extent does different treatment from white male faculty members play a role in the academic success of African American male students?
3. What is the University's responsibility regarding the education of African American males?

4. What coping strategies did these successful black male seniors employ to overcome perceived challenges to their education at a predominantly white institution?

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Since teachers teach the way they learn, and when students learn differently from the way teachers instruct, conflicts and cognitive dissonance develop. Even though the teaching/learning styles of a professor and student may differ, the differences should not be used as an excuse for poor instruction or low expectations (Hilliard, 1992). Winfield (1986) stated:

Teachers tend to teach students using an assimilationist's style that operates without regard to the cultural characteristics and cultural assets of the student. On predominantly white campuses professors need to understand the needs of African American males and adjust their instructional approach to these students (Laster, Wright, & Young, 2005, p. 517)

According to Bush and Bush (2005), the needs of black male students are very different from those of many of their classroom counterparts, professors need to learn how to accommodate these students. Black men who arrive on campus may need some special nurturing to help them adjust and adapt to the collegiate community. One very critical adjustment is in the campus environment itself: to make the environment less hostile than is the American community to black men in general and particularly those men with inner-city backgrounds (Cuyjet, 1997). As one African American student stated,

No challenge has been more daunting than that of improving academic achievement of African American students. Burdened with a history that includes the denial of education, separate and unequal education, and relegation to unsafe, substandard inner-city schools, the quest of quality education remains an elusive dream for the African American community (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 153).

White professors often treat African American males differently in their classes because they feel they are not smart enough to be at the college level. Boser (2003), for example, may have expressed sentiments of many when he avowed "We can't at the college level correct what wasn't done at elementary and secondary schools (p. 50)." Powell (2003) affirmed that anecdotal data and national trends suggested that while many enroll in high-risk subjects that challenge students such as physics, chemistry, and mathematics, African American students lack maturity and or college preparation.

Faculties that are overwhelmingly white are expected to provide effective teachers and mentors for students of color who often hail from ethnic or socioeconomic backgrounds unfamiliar to middle-class white academics. Many of these students struggle to succeed in educational cultures that are more easily negotiated by white students (Sherbinin, 2004). Consequently, the struggles of African American students to achieve educational excellence, equality and equity are critically linked to the instruction experienced in the classroom (Young, Wright, & Laser, 2005).

According to Chronicle of Higher Education data (<http://chronicle.com/weekly/almanac/2005/nation/0101404.htm>, retrieved on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006), in 2005, the six year graduation rate for African Americans attending four year



institutions was 32.3 percent; whereas the total six year graduation rate among all students was 54.5 percent.

According to Boser (2003), more and more African American males were enrolling in predominantly white colleges and universities. This may be a result of University administrators developing strategies and programs to recruit and retain a diverse undergraduate student population representative of the distribution of ethnicities within their state. Despite success in recruitment, educators were having a difficult time graduating the African American males that did enroll in their universities. The apparent stereotypical treatment that black males received from their white male professors may have been a central issue in black male retention to graduation; thus, the purpose for the present study.

#### RESEARCH SITE

The present study was conducted on the campus of a mid-sized historically and predominately white Mid-western university. The institution offered 44 bachelors degrees. The average class size was 23 students and the student-to-faculty ratio was 16:1. Approximately 72 percent of full-time faculty members held terminal degrees in their discipline and at the time of the present study, the majority of classes were taught by full-time faculty.

The campus consisted of 10 academic buildings in which students took a wide variety of classes. The majority of all social programming on the campus occurred in the University Union including, speakers, dances, performers, and banquets. Many classrooms were newly renovated and most had state of the art technology for the professors to use while conducting classes. Even though there was considerable

construction taking place on campus students were still able to easily walk anywhere on campus, and make it from building to building in a reasonable amount of time. The institution was located in a very small city in a rural area of the state, and met the true definition of a "college town."

#### SAMPLE POPULATION

Current enrollment at the institution was 12,129 students, but of this number only 346 (46 percent of the African American student population and three percent of the entire campus population) were African American males. Overall, the university had a larger female population than males with 7095 women (59 percent) enrolled. There were 406 African American women (54 percent of the African American population and 3.4 percent of the entire campus population). There were 5034 men who comprised 41 percent of the entire campus population. Finally, 90 percent of the African American student population hailed from a single major metropolitan area within the state, requiring students to travel more than 200 miles to attend the institution.

Currently tenured and tenured track faculty employed at the institution numbered 426. Of this number, only 14 (3.3 percent) were African American faculty members. The total minority faculty population was 48 (11.3 percent of all faculty members). Overall, the university had a white tenure track faculty population of 354 (83.1 percent). More than 60 percent of the tenure track faculty members were white males.

The current administrative and executive staff of the institution included 61 employees. Of the 61, only five (8.2 percent) were classified as minority. Fifty-three (86.9 percent) administrators identified as white and four (6.6 percent) identified as African American.

## METHODOLOGY

The present study utilized naturalistic inquiry. This methodology was selected because it provided the researcher and participants with several advantages (e.g., allows qualitative researchers to identify recurring patterns of behavior that participants may be unable to recognize, reveals descriptions of behaviors in context by stepping outside the group, helps to determine questions and types of follow-up research, and reveals qualities of group experience in a way that other forms of research cannot). In addition, qualitative methods permit the evaluator to study selected issues, cases, or events in great depth and detail (Patton, 2002). The disadvantage of using naturalistic inquiry is that the researcher only has the perspectives of the sample population participating in the research, and themes emerging from the research cannot be generalized beyond the sample of persons who were interviewed (McMillan & Schumacher, 2002). The present study involved "purposeful sampling" (p. 404) of currently enrolled students. To be considered for participation, each student had to meet the following criteria: (1) in their final year of college, (2) had at least one white male instructor, and (3) African American male. Characteristics such as age, academic degree program, extracurricular involvement, and prior enrollment at another institution were not considered in the selection of participants to protect confidentiality. Because of the small number of black male seniors, the above information would have made identification relatively easy.

## DATA COLLECTION

Data for the present study were collected using a focus group and individual follow-up interviews. The focus group interview took approximately 1½ to 2 hours to complete and was facilitated by the researcher. The discussion focused on the classroom experiences of African American male students on a predominantly white campus. The discussion was audio and video recorded for the purposes of insuring that everything participants contributed to the dialogue would be analyzed along with the researcher's field notes taken during and after the group was in session.

The principal researcher conducted a series of follow-up one-on-one life history interviews with the five students from the focus group. These students were purposively selected and their interviews recorded. It was the researcher's hope that during these interviews students would feel comfortable sharing information they would not feel comfortable sharing before the group.

Informed consent was received from all students prior to participating in the focus group. The focus group was conducted in a room in the university union during the spring semester of the 2005-06 academic year. Individual interviews were conducted in the office of the primary researcher. The focus group and individual interviews were the primary methods of data collection.

## LIMITATIONS

1. The present study was an examination of the problems that African American males faced in classes taught by white male professors on the campus of one predominantly white institution.

2. The current study utilized data that were specific to one institution and results can not be transferable to other predominantly white institutions
3. The findings were only specific to the perceptions of the treatment received from white male professors by African American male students.
4. This was a gender and racially based study.

#### OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS

**Attrition:** The failure of students “to reenroll at an institution in consecutive terms” For African American males, attrition may be strongly influenced by institutional practices and policies, and faculty response to individual students. (Seidman, 2005, [http://www.escsr.org/docs/MinorityStudentRetentionResourcesforPractitioners\\_files/frame.htm](http://www.escsr.org/docs/MinorityStudentRetentionResourcesforPractitioners_files/frame.htm)).

**African American/Black Student:** Students with African ancestry. The terms “African American” and “Black” are used interchangeably throughout the present work.

**Black Greek Organization:** A campus Greek lettered organization that has membership in the National Pan-Hellenic Council (<http://www.nphchq.org/about.htm>)

**Predominantly White Institutions:** Colleges and universities in which the majority of the student population, administration and faculty are of European descent.

**Retention:** The enrollment and persistence behavior of students to graduation.

**Recruitment:** The process institution representatives use to get students to enroll in the institution.

**Stereotypical treatment:** Treatment in particular ways based on the observer’s perception of culture and other issues over which the student has no control (Cuyjet, 2006).

Mentoring: "A process by which persons of superior rank, special achievements, and prestige instruct counsel, guide, and facilitate the intellectual and/or career development of persons identified as a protégé (Jacobi, 1991 p. 513)."

Successful: The attainment of senior class standing and in academic position to graduate.

### CONTENT SUMMARY

Chapter I contains a detailed introduction to the present study. An outline of what the reader will encounter in great depth has been covered in this chapter. Chapter II includes a review of literature that suggests the major problems African American males face attending predominately white institutions. Chapter III contains the methodology that was used in the current qualitative study. Chapter IV contains lived experiences of five African American males attending a predominately white institution. Chapter V includes the conclusion to the current study and compares findings with those made by previous researchers, and recommendations for future researchers and university personal. Limitations of the current study are also displayed in chapter V.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITATURE

This chapter contains a review of literature that focuses on (1) teaching styles of white male faculty when teaching African American male students, (2) classroom interactions between black male students and white male professors, (3) overall perceptions of predominately white institutions by African American male students, (4) the coping styles of academically successful African American males, and (5) the importance of mentoring and mentorship relationships when working with African American males.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is replete with findings that suggest there is a major problem with the way African American males are taught on college campuses, and that there is an unwelcoming atmosphere for African American males at predominantly white institutions. Literature also shows the importance of equal education for all students.

An institution is responsible for the healthy development and achievement of its student body regardless of race or ethnicity. When students are accepted into an institution of higher education, the responsibility lies with the university to envelope, develop and graduate students, who are psychologically and academically sound, and in so doing, provide an atmosphere of inclusion and acceptance. Since the elimination of “dejure segregation” predominantly white institutions are responsible for educating a vast majority of minority students, particularly students of African American heritage (Lett & Wright, 2003, p. 190).

## Teaching Styles

The campus community, including white male professors, must understand the stereotypes of the black male culture and treat each student individually. "White professors operate in a social space where whiteness is crediting and privileged, but is invisible and thus taken for granted" (Harlow, 2004, p. 20). Often, white professors teach their classes without the mindset that all students are different and do not understand the need to help minority students.

PWI faculty members spend much of their time teaching European cultural beliefs and a lifestyle that many African Americans can not live. African Americans rarely get to learn about themselves from white professors in a positive nature; which makes it difficult for them to believe all they are being taught (Price, 1999). Chavous, Bernat, Cone, Caldwell, Wood, and Zimmermann (2003) found that "models for student achievement outcomes focus mostly on group disparities in socioeconomic background" (p. 1078). They stated that achievement outcomes are linked to what students believe. African American students are sometimes unmotivated because they are not learning about their culture and what they were raised to believe. These students are battling with finding out who they are socially, emotionally, spiritually and racially/ethnically and dealing with personal racial identity, and it is difficult to do so at the college level (Patton, 2006).

Support for black male students is often left up to black faculty and staff. According to Jones (2004), on any predominantly white campus, black faculty are expected to, and are unofficially required to, oversee the well-being of all black students, essentially releasing non-black faculty members from direct responsibility for the overall



welfare of black male students. Black students tend to interact with black faculty members because they feel a sense of comfort and understanding from the fact that they are of the same race, and by implication, have had similar life experiences.

This lack of gaining an education from white professors does not start at the college level. African American elementary students are often times not adequately taught by white teachers due to the teachers not being able to manage classroom discipline. Many of these students are referred for special education. Wrone (2005) stated that "African American students are three times more likely to be identified with an emotional disturbance as compared to all other groups. Research shows that the overrepresentation of minority population in special education classes is due to poor assessment instruments and teacher bias (p. 6)." Instead of teaching these students at the elementary level, it is easier to classify them as special based on pre-mediated thoughts on their behavior in class. This stereotypical behavior on behalf of white K-12 teachers is something that could carry on to professors at the higher education level.

In order to see any improvement in the classroom experience of African American males, as well as overall better college experiences for minority students, white faculty need to become more active in helping black students succeed. Sherbinin (2004) stated "Faculties that are overwhelmingly white are expected to provide effective teachers and mentors for students of color who often hail from ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds unfamiliar to middle class white academics" (p. 16). Faculty members have to be willing to step out of their comfort zones for all of their students. Currently, predominately white institutions continue to enroll more minorities and these students need support from white faculty to achieve successfully (Sherbinin, 2004).

## Treatment at PWIs

Many Black men in college do not have positive experiences while they are enrolled in predominantly white institutions (Davis, 1999). African American male college students have stated they did not feel comfortable interacting with their white peers or faculty outside of the classroom based on the treatment they received in the classroom. A limited number of African American male students create an unhealthy social setting for African American male students, and also hurt their academic performance based on the fact that they did not have many classmates to work with on projects, papers and different class assignments.

According to Patton (2006), black males are asked to be the spokesperson for race and are stereotyped at PWIs.

Black males are commonly the only one of few blacks in their courses. In the classroom, they often feel uncomfortable because they are stereotyped and treated one of four ways: as the spokesperson for all black people, as the academically under prepared beneficiary of affirmative action; as the, angry defensive minority; or the invisible student (p. 2).

African American college students must also deal with being accepted by their peers back home. Once black students, even more so black men, have moved away to attend college, they desire to be respected by their home community. Returning home each week for social outlets hurts them academically by reducing time for studying. Guiffrida (2004) focused on the importance of connection with peers to student development and retention. He found that low achieving African American students had a fear of losing their connection to their friends from home and that this fear of losing old

friends ultimately resulted in attrition. Low achieving students tried to change who they were to fit in with their white peers, feeling that this was the only way to be successful at a predominately white institution. High achieving African American students were comfortable with separating themselves from the people back home because they felt they chose to stay home and not attend college. These high achieving students felt their friends back home would stunt their academic growth. One student stated he “doesn’t associate with friends from home because they are throwing their lives away by just staying home and doing nothing” (p. 700). Guiffrida also found that high achieving students adapted to predominantly white institutions much easier and usually came from more diverse geographic locales than did low achieving students. High achieving students that were not from diverse backgrounds were usually supported by their peers back home, which made it easier to be successful in college (Guiffrida, 2004).

Predominantly white institutions usually struggle with recruiting and retaining black faculty and staff (Jones, 2004). Often these students are at a disadvantage because the numbers of black faculty are very low and they must try and share their time with all of the African American students as well as the rest of the students in their courses.

Fleming (1984) stated that “black students came to white colleges expecting a degree of flexibility in responding to their needs that would match the flexibility in which many were admitted in the first place (p 12).” Many African American students are admitted on special programs, due to their personal struggles, so there would be an opportunity for a better life for these individuals. After being admitted, it is often difficult for these students to assimilate to college life without the same preparation the white students received in high school which prepared them for higher education.

## Perceptions of PWIs

It has now become uncommon on PWI campuses to see large numbers of African Americans (males, in particular) walk across the stage on graduation day. Cuyjet (1997) suggested that if administrators were concerned about the problems that black males faced in college, they must first provide non-threatening environments for African American men in which higher expectations of success can be nurtured and reinforced. Second, administrators must reeducate the majority of the community about the inaccuracy of general perceptions about black men.

Racial stereotypes are thought by many people to be an essential element of intercultural relations. Those attitudes play an instrumental role in shaping the overall environment in which students attend college and, as such, are important to understanding academic outcomes (Charles & Massey, 2003, p. 10).

African American students do not get the same satisfaction out of their college experience as do their non-black peers due to factors such as faculty knowledge and fairness, faculty caring about students as individuals, and faculty understanding students' individual life circumstances. African American males are looking for people who are there to teach them but also to understand the differences in lifestyles of all students they have in the classroom (Cuyjet, 1997). Many white faculty on predominately white campuses do not facilitate attempts to create culturally hospitable atmospheres for minority students' learning. According to Sue, Bingham, Porche-Burke & Vasquez, (1999), if educational offerings are Euro-centric, culturally different students may feel unappreciated or come to devalue their own cultural group.

This sense of dissatisfaction is also seen on the graduate level with African American male graduate students. With the low numbers of African Americans at the graduate level, often black graduate students become closer to their faculty mentors and the isolation and sense of feeling disconnected are alleviated. Additionally, black students feel they must become supportive of each other to become successful in graduate school. Black faculties at the graduate level are instantly respected by the African American graduate community and subsequently, Black graduate students try to enroll in as many classes taught by African American professors as possible. Perhaps this happens because they feel black professors can understand the struggles they face in the academic setting. It is not the job of black faculty alone to be connected to black graduate students. Whereas, black faculty members should serve as academic and visual motivators for these students, it is the responsibility of all faculty to educate African American students and help them succeed in higher education (Jones, 2004).

According to Boser (2003), staff and faculty play a big part in the retention and enrollment behaviors of African American students. Patton (2006), stated "Black students often feel isolated and marginalized at predominately white institutions. Their academic encounters in the classroom leave them feeling that their contributions have been devalued" (p. 3). "These students feel that both they and their black experience are ignored" (Boser, 2003). They feel that they are not considered as individuals. "Black students feel this way because they do not feel that white staff and faculty can relate to them as individuals (Boser, 2003; Fleming, 1984).

African American students on PWI campuses experience adaptation problems because college environments are very unique places. According to Sutton and Terrell

(1997), “minority students attending predominantly white institutions encountered difficulties adjusting to campus life academically and socially” (p. 55). Studies of African American students on historically and predominantly white campuses often reported that students felt isolated and lonesome upon arrival (Roach, 2001; Jones & Williams, 2004).

Holmes, Ebbers, and Robinson (1995) added:

Adaptation is very important because research indicates the key factor to academic success for minority students lies in their ability to find a ‘positive level of comfort’ on campus (p. 6).

According to Hammer (2003), until African American students feel comfortable at school, they do not become as engaged in learning as they need to do in order to be successful in college. African American students also need friendships on college campuses so that they can get that at home feel. “Such friendships can be formed through organizations, mentoring programs, residence hall activities, etc” (Hammer, 2003, p. 5).

Holmes, Ebbers, and Robinson (1995) concluded:

African American males must feel some sort of connectedness to the campus. Students must have an opportunity to participate in the life of the campus community. In other words, there must be opportunities to satisfy a need to participate, to be seen, and to be recognized. On white campuses, black students are more likely to be frustrated. This is because they feel abandoned by the institution, rebuffed by fellow students, and hindered from taking part in any but all-black organizational activities (p. 5).

In 2004, Jones and Williams reported that among African American students attending a predominantly white university, those who felt supported through participation in

activities and organizations persisted in the university past freshmen year and acclimated to pursue their academic career goals. Cradle and Dean (1991) concluded, "it was imperative that faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education understand the needs, backgrounds, and home environments of black students in order to facilitate their success in the academic setting" (p. 5). Student retention researchers (Satin, 1975; Beal & Noel 1980) have consistently shown that "a sense of involvement in, and belonging to, the institution has a positive impact on student success and, hence, on student retention" (Cuyjet, 1997, p. 16).

Universities do not do a good job of creating a realistic image of college for African American males. It is more valuable to an institution if an African American male can play a sport versus being academically prepared for college level scholarship. (Bryant, 2004) stated:

Imagine, if you will, the number of African American males who would be degreeless if some universities had not wanted them for their ability to manipulate a ball. Universities need to demonstrate their willingness to recruit deserving African American male students who have excelled academically, offering them a scholarship. Something is wrong when university basketball and football teams consist of almost all African American males and the debate team rarely has one. The perception of African Americans being valued is usually unseen at the university level and makes it difficult to be successful (p. 12).

### Coping Styles

African American students face many negative social development identity factors when attending predominantly white institutions. Factors such as racial

discrimination and feelings of isolation are challenges African American males face daily (Henderson, 1988). African American males have to learn how to cope with these factors to be successful in the academic setting. Therefore, it is important for African American males to develop coping strategies with the college environment to maintain their mental health and strength to endure daily challenges.

One way of coping with the daily stressors of attending a predominantly white institution is immersion into the black culture and finding black racial identity (Helm, 1990, 1995). Black males join organizations, interact and become engaged with students that are also from African descent because of the comfort level and this comfort is a way to self identify. Thompson and Fretz (1991) stated, "a clear examination of the relationship between racial identity theory and type of stressors would provide a more complete contextual analysis of African American college student experiences (p. 304)." Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood and Zimmerman (2003) found the following:

Historically, strong affiliation with the African American community has been linked to having a strong value for learning and education, a motivating value that results from an awareness of African Americans' past and current educational struggles for educational access and opportunity (p. 1077).

As African American students develop an understanding of who they are, they may begin to feel as if there is no obstacle that cannot be overcome, even life at predominantly white institutions. Helms's (1990, 1995) racial identity theory is designed to describe the race related adaptation of African Americans to racially oppressive environments. Black identity models the strategies African American males employ to



feel comfortable coping with attending PWI's by recognizing who they are. Racial identity can be viewed as an individual's beliefs about the importance and meaning of race in their lives (Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood and Zimmerman, 2003, p. 1078). Cross's (1971, 1991) psychological Nigrescence model of African American identity development posited stages characterized by beliefs regarding group importance and ideological and affective beliefs. Chavous, Bernat, Schmeelk-Cone, Caldwell, Kohn-Wood and Zimmerman (2003) concluded:

Racial identity is viewed as a multidimensional construct made up of components that incorporate a combination of ethnic awareness, sociopolitical attitudes and cultural or in-group versus out-group preferences (p. 1078).

Black Greek lettered organizations also play an instrumental role in black male coping behavior and life on predominantly white campuses. Black Greek organizations (BGO's) are in place to help African Americans find their place in college and give back to the community. According to Evans (2004),

Black Greek-lettered organizations, along with Black churches, often have provided a foundation for the fight to correct social injustices. Member organizations of the National Pan-Hellenic Council – "the Divine Nine" -- were all founded on principles of Black pride, service and justice. Founders of Black Greek-lettered organizations advanced Black democratic rights by serving in the Urban League, League of Women Voters, National Guard, American Legion, Christian Friends for Racial Equality, as well as organizing voter registration drives and voter assistance programs (p. 98).

Black males in higher education look to Black Greek lettered organizations at PWI's as a network to help them succeed in college as did many prominent African American leaders that are part of BGO's. According to Sutton and Terrell (1997), "Black Greek organizations were created to provide leadership for the African American race while at the same time incorporating aspects of racial identification and cultural heritage (p. 57)." Even though black Greek organizations serve as a form of coping for African American males they face many obstacles and problems. According to Kimbrough (2000), many black Greek organizations are on the verge of being canceled. Due to random acts of violence that occur in hazing rituals/practices, organizations are becoming more like gangs. These acts of violence are illegal but are still practiced since students are looking for opportunities to fit in and be respected.

Fraternity and sorority members considered respect a core value, that such respect could only be earned through a pledge process and that it is worth risking sanctions to continue the pledge system by taking it underground (p. 36).

In Joining Black Greek lettered organizations African American men look to fraternities as a way of connecting with the campus community and earning the respect of their black peers.

According to Cuyjet (2006), the Student African American Brotherhood has been a successful organization helping African Americans males cope with PWIs. Cuyjet (2006) stated:

The SAAB organization is one of the most dynamic and fastest growing associations in the country. It serves to assist its members to excel academically, socially, culturally, personally, and professionally. The goal is for African

American males at participating institutions to take full advantage of their academic years and to better understand and practice their full responsibilities, rights and privileges as citizens of this country (p. 258).

SAAB organizations have proven valuable to the success of African American males in higher education. Since 1990, when this organization was founded, African American males in SAAB organizations have benefited and successfully matriculated through predominately white institutions (Cuyjet, 2006).

### Mentoring

According to (Jacobi, 1991), “mentoring is a critical component of effective undergraduate education” (p. 505). There are empirical links between academic success and mentoring. Jacobi found that mentoring fosters involvement in learning, academic and social integration, social support, and developmental support. Subsequently, students are engaged in a positive and healthy relationship that can help foster academic success. In mentoring relationships students are able to receive direct support and assistance. Kram (1985) showed that in a mentorship relationship both the mentor and mentee are gaining in the interaction. “The concrete benefits that accrue to the mentor, include: development of a dependable crucial subordinate, spotting and developing new talent and repaying past debt” (p. 54). Benefits for the mentee are “role modeling, emotional and psychological support, direct assistance, and achievement long term (p. 513).” According to Holmes, Ebbers, and Robinson (1995), role modeling is an important aspect of the college experience for African American males.

Role models are important to the success of this group of students. Therefore, the individuals must have the opportunities to develop relationships with peers, professors, staff members as well as professional counselors (p. 5).

Merriam (1983) added:

The phenomenon of mentoring is not clearly conceptualized, leading to confusion as to just what is being measured or offered as an ingredient in success.

Mentoring appears to mean one thing to developmental psychologists, another thing to business people, and a third thing to those in academic settings (p.169).

Ugbah and Williams (1989) found that when being mentored African American males preferred black mentors where possible. The University of Virginia had an 86 percent graduation rate for African Americans and credited the freshmen mentorship program for its success (Olson, 2006). Students indicated that the extra attention received from an upper class leader truly helps them in the academic arena. One student in particular seemed to speak for all: "My mentor has always been there for me, whether it was a math problem or something bigger (p. 1)." This statement showed that students appreciated the help received from their peer mentors and valued what they added to their collegiate experiences.

#### History of the Black Student Enrollment at Research Site

Davis, Et al., (2004) found:

In predominantly white institutions, 70% of black students do not complete baccalaureate education compared to 20% at the historically black institutions (National Center for Education Statistics). Throughout the 1990s, the national

college dropout rate for black students was 20-25% higher than that for whites (p. 421).

Since 1984 the number of African Americans has been steadily increasing at the research site. According to the office of enrollment management, there were 419 African American students in 1984 and currently, the institution had an enrollment of 752 African American students. Detailed enrollment data were unavailable at the time of the present study due to administrative retrieval problems.

### SUMMARY OF LITERATURE

The present literature reviewed encompassed the experiences of African American males at PWI's. This literature review has demonstrated that much more needs to be understood about the ways in which successful black males negotiate the educational, social, and developmental challenges they face to obtaining their education on a historically and predominately white campus. Research shows that there is a large responsibility for white faculty and administration to help African American male students adapt to college on predominantly white campuses. African American males need to develop a sense of trust for white faculty and this trust is ultimately based on white faculty respecting the cultural differences of African American males. African American males often perceive predominantly white campuses as unwelcoming environments and places where academic success can be hard to achieve. Research suggests that classroom treatment received at predominantly white institutions can be hostile and uncomfortable. African American males have demonstrated an understanding of how to cope with the day-to-day struggles that go along with attending a PWI. Joining Black Greek organizations, developing mentor relationships with black faculty and staff,

and relying on family and friends for emotional support are among the strategies African American males employ when faced with the challenges of hostile, unwelcoming PWI campuses.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

Qualitative life history inquiry was the methodology used for the current study. Qualitative inquiry is a careful examination of the insights of the participants of the present study. According to Patton (2002) and McMillian & Schmacher (2001), data analysis is an ongoing process, often with data collection and analysis proceeding simultaneously.

#### Purpose of Study

The purpose of the present qualitative study was to evaluate teacher/student relationships between African American male college students and white male professors from the student point of view. The participants of this study were five African American males in their senior year of college. The focus group, which consisted of the same five males, was an open forum during their final semester of college. One-on-one follow-up interviews were conducted with each African American male who attended the focus group discussion. Four research questions guided the present study.

1. What is the overall treatment of black male students by white male professors?
2. To what extent does different treatment from white male faculty members play a role in the academic success of African American male students?
3. What is the university's responsibility when educating African American males?
4. What coping strategies did these successful black male seniors employ to overcome perceived challenges to their education in a predominantly white institution?

### Qualitative Design

The present qualitative life history study was conducted in two parts with current seniors at a predominantly white institution in the Midwest. Part I involved a focus group that was open to the first five African American male seniors to register to participate in the present research project. During the focus group session, students discussed their experiences over the past four years attending the selected white institution. The goal of the focus group was to identify the main factors that needed to be addressed during the one-on-one follow-up interviews. Part II was comprised of one-on-one interviews that were conducted with the same five African American male students. The individual interviews were designed to enable participants to discuss their personal stories and experiences as African American male college students that they might not have felt comfortable expressing before a group of peers. The focus of these interviews was information about students' college experiences and opportunities to expand on themes that surfaced during the focus group session.

### Location

The site for the present study was a mid-sized (12,000 students) university located in the rural Midwest. The population of the local city was approximately 25,000 including the 12,000 plus students attending the university. The institution under study offered 44 bachelors degrees. The average class size was 23 students. The student-to-faculty ratio was 16:1, and approximately 72 percent of full-time faculty had a terminal degree in their discipline. The majority of classes were taught by full-time faculty. The campus consisted of 10 academic buildings where students could take a wide variety of classes. The University Union was where the majority of all social programming on the campus took place; including speakers, dances, performers, organization meetings, etc.



## Participants

The focus group was comprised of five African American males in the final semester of their senior year of college. A list of all African American males that attended the institution was obtained from the office of Minority Affairs. The researcher randomly selected five students that were classified as seniors and asked them if they would be willing to attend the focus group and take part in an interview. All participants signed an informed consent statement agreeing to participate in both parts of the current research project. Students were enticed by the opportunity to receive free pizza by attending the focus group. The students were from different majors and locations throughout the state. Three of the students were from urban environments with very limited opportunities for interaction with Caucasians. Two of the participants were from communities that were not urban but with greater opportunities for interaction with Caucasians.

## Data Collection

During the one-on-one interviews, data were collected through digital tape recordings of the conversations. The researcher transcribed the audiotapes from the focus group and interviews in order to carry out a constant comparative analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) of what the students were sharing. The researcher sought commonalities between the focus group and the interviews, then coded all of the information collected and filed the confidential information in a safe and secure location.

## Interview Procedure

Focus groups.—One Focus Group was conducted in a residence hall basement lounge so that students could interact with their peers in a familiar and relaxed setting.

The room permitted digitally recording the data to be convenient, and serving pizza as an incentive for participation was possible.

**Individual Interviews.**-- To ensure that all participants would feel comfortable, the one-on-one interviews were conducted in the office of the researcher; where participants would be able to relax and feel comfortable not having to worry about being seen by peers and other students.

#### **Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol for both the focus group and the individual interviews consisted of ten open-ended questions (Appendix B). The plan was to get students engaged through open-ended questions so that they felt they were leading the discussion. The process was designed to get students to provide a rich record of life history data for analysis.

#### **Data Analysis**

The researcher took detailed notes during the focus group and follow-up interviews. Data were analyzed using constant-comparative methods (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001) to identify reoccurring themes. The data were coded and sorted based on the research questions that guided the study.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter is a presentation of five African American male undergraduate senior's collegiate experiences with white male faculty and the campus environment in general. Each of these men were in their last year of college and all had differing stories and experiences. All participants were willing and eager to take part in the study, to give voice to challenges they faced as African American males at one PWI. Four research questions guided the present study.

1. What is the overall treatment of black male students by white male professors?
2. To what extent does treatment from different faculty members play a role in the academic success of African American male students?
3. What is the university's responsibility regarding the educational of African American males?
4. What coping strategies did these successful black male seniors employ to overcome perceived challenges to their education in a predominantly white institution?

Throughout the focus group, individual interviews, and analysis of the findings, common themes emerged regarding teacher/student relationships, as well as participant's overall perceptions of college at a predominantly white institution.

Research Question One: What is the overall treatment of black male students by white male professors?

Three of the five student participants came from predominantly African American communities and attended high schools where over ninety percent of the student body was African American. In a one-on-one interview, one of these students stated "At my school we didn't have white people. I don't know if that was easier, but it was more comfortable for me because I was never asked to change who I am to make it through classes." Many of their high school teachers were also African American and each of these men expressed feeling a different sense of connection. These black teachers were more than just people who instructed classes, they were mentors, role models, and friends that students were comfortable talking to in and out of the classroom. When asked to speak about these special teachers, students described them as having a positive impact on their education. The words of one represent the experiences of all three:

My teachers in high school could relate to me because they took that time with each of their students. They didn't have the best resources and get paid the highest. I just think they didn't want to keep seeing black students fail. I skipped class one time and my teacher called my mom. I will never forget that. I was upset when it happened, but at graduation I realized it was to get me to that point.

These three students from inner city African American high schools revealed that they immediately felt intimidated when they found that all of their professors were white. "To see so many white people in class was scary, it was even scarier to see all my professors were white. Where I am from, you don't have to interact with them [white people]. I was scared because I didn't fit in," declared one of the three. Another, student who was not from an inner-city predominantly African American high school, felt he knew what to expect in the classroom when he enrolled at this institution.

All white people aren't bad. I lived in the suburbs my whole life and most of my teachers were white growing up. I have a lot of white friends and did well in school. I had to learn to force myself into groups and get accepted by my peers, but once they got to know me I was fine. College is the same way. I have to put myself out there to get accepted.

All five of the students felt it was difficult in the classroom when white male professors viewed them as the spokespersons for their race and/or perceptibly attempted to "dumb down" their teaching. These instructors' behaviors made the students feel as if they were inferior to their white classroom counterparts and could not learn at the same pace. One of the students, in particular, coming from a Chicago public school, felt that instead of being taught as equals, his white male professors attempted to act more "urbanized" when interacting with students of color. This student felt his professors did not see him as smart as the rest of the class, so they used stereotypical language when speaking with him. He elaborated:

I receive stereotypical treatment. Many of my professors try to use slang when talking to me and not the rest of the class. I can tell it is because of my race, but I just ignore it and continue with what is being taught. It hurts that no other students in the classes can see me singled out, and [they] act as if the teacher is just being funny.

Another participant talked about being singled out by the professor and feeling the professor was trying to change his wording to be politically correct around African American males.

Whenever my teacher talks, I can tell he changes his words. Whenever he is about to say black or African American, he hesitates, as if he is substituting these words for something else but you really don't know. I am not really sure what he is really thinking and if he is racist. That is however, my interpretation.

The five students all shared that during their four years at the institution, they had not experienced any form of blatant racism or discrimination, but they all felt it occurred at the institution. When asked if these occurrences were seen in the classroom, one student stated:

They (white male professors) have pre-conceived notions of what the average black male can do. If you sit back and never ask for help and do not see professors in their office hours, they're going to pretty much let you fail. You have to show initiative to be treated the same as any other students. They think that you are less than a good student and you have to fight to prove you deserve to be in the classroom.

Another student added to this comment: "Yeah, if you don't put in any extra effort toward it, you won't get help. They will ask the white students if they want to stay after class to talk about what was discussed in the class that day."

This student felt the professor did not want him in the course and quickly stated, "I have to work twice as hard to be successful." All five participants indicated feeling that they were not perceived as equals in the classroom and had to challenge their professors to truly get an education. These students felt their professors' behaviors were forms of subtle racism because their differential treatment was all apparently based on their race.

When asked to discuss their perceptions of what the role of their professors were, one of the participants described feeling that he was receiving good grades based on his race, because he believed that he was not being taught much, but he was nevertheless receiving good grades.

I had a professor that gave me straight A's because he wants to be nice to me. I know this is based on my race; he gives me extra attention and wants to guarantee I am enjoying class. He was just giving me grades because I wasn't learning anything. It seemed to me he had a point to make sure I saw that he wasn't racist and tried extra hard to prove this in the class.

Overall, the students felt their white male professors viewed them as less qualified than other students to be at the university. Although these five black males often felt they had to be the spokesmen for their race, they noted this made it difficult for other students to treat them equally. In an interview, a student stated:

Anything we talk about in class that could be referred to African Americans, I had to give the class my viewpoint even though it may differ from that of other black students. Professors ask me questions like "What was that like growing up black?" I am from the suburbs. That means my life is completely different from the life of a lot of blacks. But in class, I am just black. This treatment makes it hard for my peers to see me as a student.

They stressed wanting professors to challenge them as students, as they would any white student in their course. "If I ever want to make it in society, I need to learn something in my classes. Professors need to push me to want to learn, not just tell me what I need to do to pass." All five of the participants felt they were stereotyped by their professors upon

initial entrance into classes. As one participant described his experiences, he made the following observations “They [white male professors] need to talk to us as they would any other guy. The professors need to reach out to all students and look past just color.”

Research Question Two: To what extent does different treatment from white male faculty members play a role in the academic success of African American male students?

All students in the present study expressed strong belief in the realization that if African American males want to be successful in college, they can only do this with the help of the faculty. Being successful in college means not only graduating, but learning things that prepare one for the real world; this is something students receive from interacting with professors. One student spoke of his expectations and failures before he understood it was his responsibility to ask his white male professor for help.

I came to college with the mindset that I would be able to just do my work as I did in high school and I will be fine. I got in my first class as a freshmen and that was not the case. I actually struggled and did not understand how important interacting with my professor would be in my success. I let myself fail my first course because I needed help and did not know how to ask because I never had that problem in high school.

This student did not come from a predominately black high school and thought he knew what it took to be successful in college.

Student success is a reflection of the professor’s hard work and dedication in making sure everyone in the course has an understanding of the subject matter (McKeachie, 2002). The student/teacher relationship has to be reciprocal because students need to be able to look to professors as masters of the subject and feel



comfortable interacting with them in and outside of the classroom and professors depend on students to inform them of any learning difficulties. Two of the five participants felt their relationships with their white male professors were not at levels where they could enjoy interpersonal communication with them.

Laughing, and talking to my professors outside of the classroom is not an option. I barely feel comfortable interacting with my professors inside the classroom. I feel that there are too many instances where my professors look to me as less than a student and look at me as just a black boy. Why would I want to feel like this outside of the classroom?

The other four students echoed this sentiment and joined in laughter. They looked at it as a chore to see their professors outside the classroom. Three of the five participants did not like to interact with their professors but understood the importance and made sure it was done in each of their courses.

I hate my trips to my professor's office but they are the only chance I have to get my questions asked without being looked at as stupid in the class by my classmates. It also gives me the opportunity to get my face seen by my professors and lets them know that I am trying to learn.

These seniors understood that the key to success was in the hands of the professors but they did not talk to their white male professors about anything other than subject matter because they did not experience the level of respect they felt they deserved.

My skin puts me at a disadvantage when it comes to interacting with my professors, because they do not understand where I come from and do not value my culture.

Although this student felt he was not valued by professors, when asked to elaborate, he seemed a little upset and shy at the same time and did not expand on his comment.

Students did not feel that all their white male professors deliberately failed to help them. One participant referred to his experience with a white female professor to illustrate the difference:

I had an English professor that pushed me to be successful and really taught me how to write. She pulled me to the side to go over corrections on my papers as well as called on me in the class to get me engaged into the learning. She is the only professor that I can remember interacting with in or outside of the classroom.

This participant's eyes lit up when he talked about this situation and really seemed to value learning from the professor. He reflected on this course, stating how he felt that even though he did not receive his highest grades in college, the professor did a good job of educating him on how writing is important. He learned, and that is the responsibility he shared with his professor.

During discussion about courses with African American faculty, students joked about how these courses could be viewed as more difficult. One participant's words were typical:

Black teachers ain't no joke; they push me harder than all the rest of the professors and I love it. I think of it as tough love and I think that they see something in me that I forget exists, at times, in the rest of my classes. They see potential and know that nothing will come to me easy. I feel that this is preparing me for the real world and making me a better student.

Another student added that he had a conversation with a black professor and affirmed that the other participant was stating a truism.

A black professor talked to me and told me I have to try harder if I want to make it through college. He told me about all the students that never make it to graduation and wanted me to be different.

The above quote appears to represent faculty serving as mentors to students and pushing them to succeed. Students looked up to professors and it was important they could see positive attitudes from them, so they had something to look forward to in their student/teacher relationship.

During a discussion that took place in the focus group the students analyzed their professors' productivity, and the amount they learned from each. Regardless of the level of the courses students felt they were not evaluated based on the work they produced in general. The participants did not credit their white male professors with doing a good job of teaching them in styles of pedagogy that facilitated mastery of the subject matter.

In the past four years, I really haven't learned much and I am graduating in a few weeks. My teachers were more worried about being liked in class, to the point where I was looked at as a student that was evaluating them, so they didn't really teach well.

During this conversation another participant added this comment: "My professors are too intimidated by me to effectively teach me." When asked to elaborate on this situation, he followed up with "I am a black male. My professors are scared to see me succeed."

Research Question Three: What is the university's responsibility regarding meeting the educational needs of African American males?

When the focus group discussed being prepared for college, one student declared the university had an obligation to all students to get them up to speed.

It is the job of the university to help all people transition to college, not just black people. If there are students that need extra help, there need to be things at the school for those people as well. There are programs like TRIO and Gateway, but you don't hear about those things until you are already doing badly in school.

This student felt as if it was the responsibility of the school to make sure he was successful in college and the institution should provide the support he and all other students needed. This student also referred to the support programs for African Americans as positive safety nets, but that they were not readily available for him to take advantage of. This student spoke as if too much emphasis was centered on the students who did not try to do well in high school, and he was left out because he earned good grades in high school. He stated, "Programs like TRIO give students laptops to use and a special advisor to help them succeed. I need these same services, but I am not eligible."

Many African American students have never been in a classroom with white students until they entered a predominantly white institution. Students expressed there is a need for support for their well-being, if there would ever be a better chance for them to be successful in higher education.

Three of the five participants felt they were not as prepared as their white counterparts in the classroom. These students all stated that they were in the top of their high school classes and felt they were ready for college, but upon entering the college classrooms, they quickly found out this was not the case. One student in particular noted:

I am now prepared after being in college for a few years. I was in the top of my class in high school and thought that I was ready to be a scholar in college. When I got to college, I took a freshmen math course and could not understand what was going on. Things were moving too fast. The professor had too many students to help me and I failed the course because I could not get brought up to speed.

He believed had he a support group to associate, he might have found help in this math course and had a better chance of passing it the first time instead of needing to retake the course.

With obvious confidence in his own abilities, one student declared there was no need for any extra support other than what was already in existence to help all African American students. The problem had to do with awareness.

I think there is a lot of stuff already in place. It is just the lack of how they market it to us or how we don't take advantage of it. Programs through different offices are here, but we find about it too late and do not have the opportunity to take part. This student was from a predominately African American high school and felt there was no extra help for him there. He did not want it at this level. However, when asked about different transition issues, he stated, "Maybe we do need a way to get all black people together at the beginning of the year, like a social or something."

The participants also spoke about the status of the Black Greek Organizations on campus. He was concerned for their low numbers and ability to be support structures.

The National Pan-Hellenic Greek Organizations were founded to help black students cope with the day-to-day college life. Having only four of nine

organizations on campus does not truly represent a positive image of black Greeks. It is hard to look to them as a support network.

Another participant, a member of a Greek Organization, took offense to the comment above and added, "You can't blame the Greeks. We do not have enough university support to be successful organizations." When asked, "What do you want the university to do to help Black Greek Organizations?" ,he stated, "Just treat us the same way the other Greek organizations are treated and give us the help needed to get our numbers up and be productive organizations."

When asked "Do you feel that you receive sufficient support at this institution? If so, what type(s) of support, and where is support lacking?", students described missing things that were close to them personally. Specifically, they missed African American health and grooming products and events that they have been accustomed to experiencing as they grew up but were not available at the university or in the local community.

I have to struggle to make it because I can't buy shoes, clothes or even get a hair cut at this school. Dining on campus does not take my culture into account, and I can not have a social life because people do not understand what I am used to in the inner city of Chicago.

All five participants were in agreement that they had to learn to adapt to this predominantly white institution and its environs, and that if the institution cared about them they would not have had to go out of their way to seek services that would help them feel welcome and comfortable. One student expressed the sentiments of all:

Most black students do poor in school their first year of college because they have to learn how to play the game of college at a white school. They have to learn how to adapt and survive in the white environment and living in the country. Another student spoke about the addition of the African American hair salon that was added in the University union, and suggested the new shop was the school's genuine effort to provide African Americans with basic cultural comforts.

A hair cut for men and getting your hair done for women is important in the black culture. It sort of brightens up the worst day by just getting a good haircut. The shop in the union gives us that "at home feeling" because we can talk *barber shop talk* and enjoy the experience. This is a step toward making blacks feel comfortable at a PWI.

Research Question Four: What coping strategies did these successful black male seniors employ to overcome perceived challenges to their education at a predominantly white institution?

Each of the participants described their major way of coping with the challenges that go along with attending a predominately white institution as simply getting involved.

Black Organizations are in place to serve as a network for students. Being around all white people, it is nice to have organizations that have the fundamental purpose of uplifting the African American culture.

This student enjoyed the fellowship within African American recognized student organizations and looked at the groups as providing a network of friends he could talk with about his problems and concerns at the institution. He felt that because there were African American students in different class years, there was always someone there who

had walked in his shoes before. And he loved to talk to them about their process. During his one-on-one interview, this student described his experience:

It was nice to learn and interact with upper-class black students when I was younger. They give me a sense of hope that I could get to their level one day. At BSU [Black Student Union], I was on committees with upper level students and we had many talks that helped shape me into a better student.

Another student from a predominantly black high school came to this institution to get out of his all black environment and was looking for an opportunity to be more prepared for the real world by meeting and interacting with people of all races. However, he felt that upon arriving at the institution he was expected to only interact with black people. "I came to college to be prepared for the real world, but I got here and was only accepted by my black peers:" He was in complete disagreement with the other respondents about joining only black organizations. His strategy for coping was to "put himself in the face of the university:"

I get as involved as I possibly can. I joined student government, Black Student Union, the Residence Hall Association and work on campus in the University union. I get treated with respect because people see what I can do as an individual and cannot deny me based on my actions.

This student was very passionate making this statement, showing a great deal of emotion. He had enjoyed the amount of involvement he had on campus and felt he was treated as an equal because he had proved himself worthy to all his peers and staff of the institution.

When asked, "If you could change one thing about your college experience, what would it be?" a student stated, "I wish more upperclassmen weren't so selfish when I was



a freshman.” He felt the best way of coping with attending a predominantly white institution was through looking up to successful African American upper-class students. He stated, “It is pleasing to see someone that has walked in your shoes and made it over the hump.” As a senior, this student continued to mentor younger minority students because he believed mentoring was an important method of coping at the institution. When asked about how he mentors students, he added:

When new black freshmen come to school, I try my best to take as many of them under my wing and show them there is more to college than drinking and partying. I have real conversations with them about life so they see at least one positive influence in college. Many of them put in extra effort because they don't want to let me down.

#### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Sufficient data were collected during the focus group and interviews. The participants were asked ten open-ended questions that can be found in Appendix B. The information gathered from the students has been presented in the format of six themes: (1) serving as spokesperson for the entire black race in classes, (2) professors not truly teaching black students, (3) lack of support at the institutional level for success of African Americans, (4) African American students are only accepted by their black peers, (5) black students truly want to learn and be prepared for life after college and are not looking for just grade hand outs, and (6) perceptions of PWI's as welcoming/accepting and nurturing or hostile campus environments that help / hinder the success of black students.

The participants of the current study showed the advantages/disadvantages they see on a daily basis as African American males at a PWI. The first theme focused on serving as a spokesperson for the entire African American race in classes. The participants of this study described that this is not fair of the professors to expect one person to give an accurate portrayal of the perceptions and feeling of an entire race. The voices of these participants showed unrealistic classroom expectations to represent one's entire race hindered their opportunity for equal education, because too much time in courses was spent speaking for one's race. These African American males did not feel comfortable interacting with most white students because they felt they were looked down upon by white students in general. These men did not feel recognized as "just another classmate and regular student."

The second theme focused on professors not truly teaching black students. There were occasions when these African American males received good grades from white male professors based on their race alone. Participants felt professors tried to make up for things that happened in the past by handing out good grades and were not truly concerned about teaching students. The participants stated that as African Americans looking for a chance to learn skills that would prepare them for life after college. Successful life preparation could not be achieved if professors did not take the time to teach, but rather just assigned grades and had low standards and expectations for their students. These students wanted to be challenged while attending college.

The third theme was lack of support at the institutional level for the academic success of African Americans. The participants agreed that there were support programs in place to help African American males, but these support networks were reserved for

students that were already "at risk" for college success. According to these five black men, there needed to be support networks in place for all African Americans that attended predominantly white institutions, not just those students that were having difficulties academically. Additionally, more people at the institution need to serve as role models to African American males other than just the limited number of African American faculty. These successful African-American male seniors suggested a mentorship program for African American freshmen. Participants felt peer and faculty mentors could help with the transitional issues that younger African American males face at PWI's.

The fourth theme was that African American students were only accepted by their black peers. African American students at PWI's are almost instantly accepted by their African American peers, but these men found it was a struggle to interact with white students. White privilege was an unavoidably present day challenge at this predominantly white institution and these African-American participants said that this sense of White entitlement was very difficult to deal with at PWI's. Black students were only expected to join Black Greek organizations, attend black social gatherings, and interact with only black students when there is a desire among many to interact with all students.

The fifth theme emerging from the present study was that black students truly wanted to learn and be prepared for life after college and were not looking for grade hand outs. Students wanted tools that would prepare them for life after college. Participants stated that the key to success after college was help from professors to get them ready for the "real world." Often the major student focus appeared to be on receiving grades and the ultimate goal of receiving a degree rather than on getting an education. Regardless of

their grades, these African American males were looking to their futures. Making it through college was a stepping stone for life and students understood the need for proper tools to be successful.

The sixth and final theme was described as a tension between perceptions of PWI's as welcoming/accepting and nurturing places or hostile campus environments that hindered the success of black male students. The participants maintained the transition to a PWI from high school was difficult because the environment was different from what they were used to. Despite the existence of several academic support programs and the addition of new services, the campus remained a hostile and unwelcoming environment to these African American men. Successful African American students learned to adapt to the local community. Participants voiced that it was difficult to be successful when they did not feel welcome in the community. This last theme stood out because it was important to the participants, as a group and as individuals. They all believed they had worked diligently to make it to the point where they could see graduation as a possibility.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present qualitative life history study was implemented to explore the classroom experiences of five African American males at a predominantly white institution. The focus of the research was to identify factors that may lead to African American student success in the classroom. This chapter is a comparison of the literature and the lived experiences of the five participants. This chapter also includes recommendations for faculty and future researchers, limitations, and a conclusion to the study.

#### Significance of Results

Many themes were drawn from the focus group and follow-up interviews regarding the experiences of African American males at one predominantly white institution. Four research questions directed the present study. There were many similarities and differences identified in the students' experiences and perceptions and the published literature. The African American males in the present study were all successful students on their way to graduating from college and preparing for the real world. They all found the key to being successful academically and wanted to take part in this study to help educate other African American males on how to succeed in college. The greatest connection between the published research and the findings in the present study was that participants affirmed that their interactions with faculty members played a key role in their success in college (Fleming, 1984; Cuyjet, 1997, 2006). "Black students often enter college with a feeling of distrust of white advisors, staff, and faculty (Willie & McCord,

1972). These students feel that both they and their black experience are ignored” (Fleming, 1984, p. 12).

Flemings posited that African American college students enrolled at PWIs without a lot of interactions with white male professors which causes a tension in the student/professor relationships. Students feel a sense of distrust for white faculty; faculty members are not willing to take the extra initiative to understand African American students and lose them in the classroom. Fleming also stated that it is critical for white professors to show African American students that their culture is valued and they are not just tolerated in classes. If a student feels that his black experiences are being ignored, how can he be expected to be successful in the classroom?

Participants in the study felt that it was a major transition to get to know white faculty. Coming from high schools where there were more diverse teachers these students were not accustomed to assimilating to the white culture to learn. A lack of trust for their professors was apparent based on cultural differences. A student who really felt strongly about how his professors treated him stated, “My skin puts me at a disadvantage when it comes to interacting with my professors because they do not understand where I come from and do not value my culture.” This comment from the current respondents showed how trends found in research from 1984 are still apparent in higher education more than a score of years later.

This study also showed that African American males cope with life on a predominantly white campus by immersion into their own culture (Cross, 1971, 1991). The participants in the study felt that cultural immersion was a very important way of dealing with the added stressors that come along with attending white institutions. The

participants stated that their involvement in organizations such as Black Student Union, Black Greek Organizations, and NAACP have been instrumental in finding a place for themselves in college and attaining academic success.

Research and the current study both showed that mentoring was an important aspect in the success of African American males in higher education. A participant in the current study stated:

It was nice to learn and interact with upper-class black students when I was younger. They give me a sense of hope that I could get to their level one day. At BSU, I was on committees with upper level students and we had many talks that helped shape me into a better student.

Holmes, Ebbers, and Robinson (1995) found that African American males were more successful if they have a role model to look up to at predominantly white institutions.

Role models are important to the success of this group of students. Therefore, the individuals must have the opportunities to develop relationships with peers, professors, staff members as well as professional counselors (p. 5).

Research and the current study suggested that mentoring benefits African American males. It was also shown that African American males preferred to look up to other successful African Americans. Ugbah and Williams (1989) found that African American males preferred black mentors wherever possible.

There was one major gap in the research that this study showed to be very important. African American males wanted to interact with their professors and be successful in college. These students were aware of the importance of faculty in the learning process and wanted to be a valued part of the classroom. Specifically, these

students wanted their culture to be accepted on a par with Euro-American culture. The participants felt that they had to compromise who they were culturally if they wanted to be treated similarly to white students by the faculty members teaching their courses (Cuyjet, 2006). It is important that all students feel valued and professors do a good job treating all students equally (Boser, 2003).

All students do not feel as if their professors failed to help them.

I had an English professor that pushed me to be successful and really taught me how to write. She pulled me to the side to go over corrections on my papers as well as called on me in the class to get me engaged into the learning. She is the only professor that I can remember interacting with in or outside of the classroom. However, the professor thus cited was a white female, and not a white male.

These students wanted it to be known they wanted to be pushed to be successful academically and were not looking to lean on their race as an excuse for a reason to be in college. These students wanted professors who are willing to help them as they would any other student in their classes, as they too can learn from all professors who work to teach / reach all of their students (Cuyjet, 2006).

According to Jones (2004) on any predominantly white campus, black faculty are expected to, and are unofficially required to, oversee the well-being of black students; essentially releasing non-black faculty members from direct responsibility for the overall welfare of black male students. The present study supported the idea that students are pushed by their African American faculty to be successful as students.

Black teacher's aint no joke; they push me harder than all the rest of the professors and I love it. I think of it as tough love and I think that they see



something in me that I forget exist at times in the rest of my classes. They see potential and know that nothing will come to me easy. I feel that this is preparing me for real world and making me a better student.

This student's voice reflected the connection to the research and that students looked to their black faculty as a form of advisor and mentor even if faculty were not assigned to the role as a part of his or her job description (Jones, 2004).

Gifford (2004) focused on the importance of connection with peers to student development and retention amongst African American college students. The participants of the present study felt that it was very important to connect with peers to cope with the challenges of attending a PWI. The participants felt that they were often forced to connect with their African American peers because they were looked at differently by their white peers. This difference was at times based on the actual differential treatment that they received in the classroom by their white professors. The participants stated that white students were at an advantage in classes because they were never forced to defend or speak for their race; African Americans are at times the only black student in their classes and have to be the spokesperson on different topics (Patton, 2006).

African American students need an environment at predominately white institutions where they can get comfortable and feel as if they are at home in a welcoming environment (Patton, 2006). One of the participants stated:

I have to struggle to make it because I can't buy shoes, clothes or even get a hair cut at this school. Dining on campus does not take my culture into account and I can not have a social life because people do not understand what I am used to in the inner city of Chicago.

This statement shows how important everyday things are to black students and they do not realize the need until it is gone. If institutions value their students and expect them to be productive, they need to guarantee they are able to live a life that they are somewhat used to and not spend important time trying to adjust to the institution (Cuyjet, 1997). A primary researcher on the college life of African American males shows the predominately white university campus does not present a hospitable atmosphere for minority students' learning (Holmes, Ebbers, and Robinson, 1995). If educational offerings are Euro-centric, culturally different students may feel unappreciated or come to devalue their own cultural group (Fleming, 1984).

If institutions expect African American males to be successful, they have to support the students' culture and have an understanding of their identity development (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006). Cradle and Dean (1991) concluded "it was imperative that faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education understand the needs, backgrounds, and home environments of black students in order to facilitate their success in academic settings" (p. 5). This cultural understanding ties to the beliefs of the participants that a major problem at predominantly white institutions is the struggles male faculty members have understanding students that may be from different cultures (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006). Due to this lack of understanding faculty members often talk at a level where they feel that they would be accepted by their black students, but which has the effect of alienating themselves from their black students.

I receive a stereotypical treatment. Many of my professors try to use slang when talking to me and not the rest of the class. I can tell it is because of my race, but I just ignore it and continue with what is being taught. It hurts that no other students

in the classes can see me being singled out and act as if the teacher is just being funny.

The participants of the study saw this differential faculty approach to African American males as a reoccurring problem that made it extremely difficult for them to feel as an equal when they were looked at as “dumb” since the professor felt that he could not speak to them at an equal level.

#### Limitations

Some limitations to this study are worth noting. Qualitative research focuses on understanding the experiences of the participants, and not on generalizing results beyond the purposive sample of students who were studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

1. The present study only focused on African American male students perceptions of classes taught by white males and did not include courses taught by non-whites/ African American males / females and / or White women.
2. The present study utilized data that were specific to one institution and results cannot be generalized to other predominantly white institutions.
3. The findings are only specific to the perceptions of the treatment received from white male professors by African American male students.
4. This was a gender and racially based study.
5. Voices of white male professors were not included in the present study. White male professors were not able to include their experience with perceptions of black male students.
6. Some participant interviews did not contain as much thick description (McMillian& Schmacher, 2001) as the researcher would have preferred.

## RECOMENDATIONS

Based on the data collected and presented in this study, several recommendations are offered to those individuals who truly care about the well being of African Americans and their success in higher education.

1. Faculty members must realize that African American males want to be valued in the classroom. Interaction with the professor is key to getting these students acclimated in the class and helping them develop a good relationship with the professors to the point where they feel comfortable interacting outside of the classroom, and getting engaged in the learning inside the classroom.
2. Training on understanding, appreciating, and celebrating different cultures is something that faculty need to go through to truly value all of the students they teach. It is easy to stereotype something that one does not have a good understanding of, and students tend to feel that this happens to them when interacting with Caucasian professors.
3. Predominately white institutions must take into account the needs of African Americans students that come from geographic areas that are extremely different from that of the institution's environment, and have goods and services readily accessible to help these students lead a normal African American life (Ex. Barber shops, food, hair care products, and "comfort goods" that are culturally needed to personally survive).

4. Institutions must continue to look at the overall climate and make sure it is welcoming for African American male students to make sure their presence is accepted at the university and not just tolerated.
5. More programs need to be implemented to help African Americans transition to college at the same level as white students. Mentorship programs, tutors, and other support services are needed.
6. Better advertisement of the programs available to minority students on campus need to be implemented. If institutions want African American students to take part in programming, focused advertisements to these students by credible staff members must be made.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCHERS

1. Conduct a similar study that takes into account a comparison of factors in African American student success at PWI's and historically black institutions. This comparative study could help show the strengths and weaknesses of both systems and could potentially create a better understanding of the problems associated with student success.
2. Sample the entire population of African American seniors. There should be no problem at a medium sized institution to interview the entire set of African American male graduates to get a richer perspective on the situation.
3. Determine if White female professors are perceived differently than White male professors. There is an opportunity to look at the comfort level amongst African American males when being taught by female professors.

4. The present study only looked at males that were successful and in their last semester of college. Interviewing a cohort of black males from entrance to college graduation could really help to get a better understanding of what is needed to assist in the transition from high school to college, as well as examine the needs of black males before they acquire dysfunctional coping strategies dealing with the situations they face at PWIs.
5. Focus on African American males who dropped out of the institution to see what caused these students to decide to leave the university.

### CONCLUSION

The results from this study indicated that graduating African American males at this predominately white institution wanted to be successful in higher education and value the relationship with their professors. African American males may not show the same promising attitude upon entering the classroom as the rest of the students, but this motivation does not take away from their desire to get an education. African American males in the present study spoke much about how the community difference from college to that of the cities they were from made it difficult for them to enter college classrooms with the same amount of trust for white faculty as that of a white student. African American males need to feel comfortable with the faculty members in their classes before they are ready to truly invest in their college experience. African American males are not looking for any special treatment, they simply want professors to be culturally aware of the differences and sympathize with struggles they face to attain success in higher education. The overall experiences of the participants in the present study showed that faculty members still seemed to stereotype black males based on a lack of understanding

of African American culture, and students really wanted faculty to value them as individuals.

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APPENDICES

**Appendix A**  
**Informed Consent Form**

Informed Consent Form

The purpose of this research project entitled, "The Classroom Experience of African American Males at a Predominately White institution" examines the relationships between African American males and white professors as well as the overall college experience of African American males at a predominately white institution. For this project, you will be asked to go through a one on one interview to discuss your college experience. It will take you approximately 30 minutes to an hour to complete. The one on one interview will be audio taped for transcription purposes. The tape will be erased and destroyed if you decide to withdraw from the research prior to completion of the interview.

There are no foreseeable risks or ill effects from participating in this study. However, should you experience any feelings of anxiety after completing the survey, there are counseling services available to you through health services at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this research project will help gather data about the teaching styles when working with black males and the overall college experience of African American males.

Please feel free to ask any questions of the Investigator (Dannie Moore) before signing this form and beginning the survey or at any time during the study.

For one's rights as a research subject, the following persons may be contacted: Institutional Review Board, Eastern Illinois University, 600 Lincoln Avenue, Charleston IL 61920, 217-581-8576, [eiuirb@eiu.edu](mailto:eiuirb@eiu.edu)

.....

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in this research project entitled, "Classroom Experience of African American Males at a Predominately White institution". I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep for future reference. I also understand that my consent to participate includes completing an interview. Finally, I understand that this study is completely voluntary and I am free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice from the Investigator.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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**Appendix B**  
**Interview Protocol**



### Interview Protocol

1. What is your overall perception of predominately white institutions after attending this institution so many years?
2. Why did you decide to attend this institution over a historically black institution?
3. Do you ever feel that you receive different treatment in the classroom when being taught by Caucasian professors? If so what type of treatment?
4. Do you feel that you receive support at this institution? If so what type of support? Where is the support lacking?
5. Have you ever been discriminated against at this institution? If so how have you faced or experienced discrimination? How do you deal with this discrimination?
6. How does this institution differ from you high school experience in terms of race?
7. At this institution do you feel that you are as academically prepared as your white counterparts? If not, do you feel you need extra help from your professors?
8. What were your expectations when you decided to attend this institution? Do you feel that your expectations have been met?
9. If you could change one thing about your college experience what would it be? And why?
10. What fears do you have about being academically successful or unsuccessful?