

2020

African American Males' Perceptions on Increasing Retention and Graduation Rates

Edwan L. O'Neal
Walden University

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Walden University

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Edwan L. O'Neal

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Review Committee

Dr. Barbara Salice, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. Maureen Ellis, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Dr. Leslie VanGelder, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost

Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University

2020

Abstract

African American Males' Perceptions on Increasing Retention and Graduation Rates

by

Edwan L. O'Neal

MS, University of West Alabama, 2004

BS, University of West Alabama, 2002

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

December 2020

Abstract

African American males have the lowest retention and graduation rates of all races and genders. The problem at the local study site was that lower number of African American males from two public 4-year institutions were graduating from college as compared to all other ethnic groups and genders. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify college experiences that had a positive impact on retention and graduation, as perceived by African American males. Tinto's persistence theory, describing the development of student identity and student retention in higher education, guided the study. The research questions explored African American male students' perceptions about campus experiences that had the most impact on their remaining in school and being successful and the differences in the campus experiences at historically Black colleges and universities versus predominantly White institutions. Using a purposeful sample, data were collected from focus group interviews with a total of 30 African American male students enrolled full-time at a predominantly White institution (n=?) and a historically Black college and university (n=?). Data were organized and analyzed to identify codes and themes. Findings indicated that both focus groups encountered challenges on campus, including (a) acceptance and affordability, (b) supportive faculty, (c) employment of more African American faculty, (d) inclusion, and (e) mentorship. The project that developed from the findings included a position paper supporting the findings and recommendations based on the emergent themes. Implications for social change include strategies to improve retention and graduation rates as well as ways to positively impact African American male students' overall campus experience.

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Dedication

Through this research process, I have found a renewed strength within myself and in my abilities to persevere in the face of adversity. To my family and friends, thank you for always listening to me about my dreams and aspirations. It probably annoyed you, but it meant a lot having your encouragement. You mean so much to me, and I am grateful to have such amazing people in my life.

To my mother, I am extremely blessed to have you as my mom, my foundation of inspiration and support throughout my entire life. You have always believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself. There are no words to express the love I possess for you!

To my son, you have changed my entire world in so many ways. I never would have imagined how impactful your presence would be for the rest of my life. You have given me the motivation to conquer any quest or goal in life. You have made me a better man, husband, and friend. I love you son, more than you will ever realize; this degree and everything I do is ultimately to benefit you.

To my wife, you were the motivation for me to pursue this degree. You have been an amazing wife, mother, and best friend. We are so blessed to have you in our lives. I know this is a cliché, but this degree is as much yours because you shared my pain and struggle and kept pushing me forward. Thank you for the undying love and support.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

African American males' troubled status in higher education has garnered tremendous attention over the past few decades. The problem at the local study site was that African American males from two public 4-year institutions were not graduating from college as compared to all other ethnic groups and genders. As researchers make the complexities of this problem increasingly clear, educators, administrators, and policymakers in higher education have grappled with the question of what can be done to improve African American males' student success. Developing an understanding of what contributes to experiences that motivate students to achieve their academic and personal goals is important. Although some colleges and universities have enacted programs to address the needs of African American male students, administrators and faculty have a responsibility to respond to their unique needs, to retain them in school, and to ensure that they earn a degree.

According to Toldson (2019), politicians and experts have popularized the belief that there is one third more African American men incarcerated than in higher education institutions. These ideas have been perpetuated in an attempt to dramatize the plight of African American males (Harper, 2012). Although the characterization that there are more African American males in prison than in college is inaccurate, observers agree that there are far too many African American males in prison and not enough being successful in college (Toldson, 2019). Understanding the college experiences that motivate students to achieve academic and personal goals is important, especially for

African American males whose college retention and completion rates are lower than any other ethnic group (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2018).

As the racial demography of the United States changes, researchers have been more intentional about exploring the experiences, challenges, and success factors for groups of color underrepresented in higher education (Harper, 2016). The higher education enrollment crisis is just one of many issues for the African American male student. According to the NCES (2018), retention and graduation rates of African American male students are well below those of all ethnic groups and genders. Therefore, the combination of the retention and graduation rates indicates a crisis in higher education as well as in African American communities.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify college experiences that had a positive impact on retention and success during college as perceived by African American males. Using this approach, rather than focusing on students who did not remain in college, I provide current student recommendations rather than nonstudent speculation on retention and the steps required to improve the situation. According to the administrators at the local study sites, African American males from two public 4-year institutions were not graduating from college, as compared to all other ethnic groups and genders (personal communication, March 30, 2018).

This study involved exploring African American males from two public 4-year institutions to provide their thoughts on the experiences that have been most meaningful in their journey toward completing their baccalaureate degree. Gaining an understanding

of college experiences that are perceived to have been important at these two different institutions can assist in developing a more in-depth understanding of campus experiences that may provide positive results at any institution with significant African American male enrollment. Therefore, the problem at the local study site was that African American males from two public 4-year institutions were not graduating from college as compared to all other ethnic groups and genders. Table 1 describes basic facts about the participating institutions.

Table 1

University Information

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Sector type</u>	<u>Enrollment</u>	<u>In-state tuition</u>	<u>Out-of-state tuition</u>
University 1	Public PWI	9,736	\$10,714	\$22,362
University 2	Public HBCU	6,106	\$ 9,744	\$18,354

National Center for Education Statistics (2018)

Rationale

In the state where the sites are located, there is a local problem of African American males not graduating from college, as compared to all other ethnic groups and genders (NCES, 2018). University 1 is a predominantly White institution (PWI) that is a research-intensive and recognized technological university located in a southern state. The institution has a current enrollment of 9,736 students, inclusive of undergraduates and graduates. The overall retention rate is 83%, and the overall graduation rate is 52% (NCES, 2018). The African American population consists of 946 students, which is 9.7% of the total student population, and African American faculty represent 11.4% of all faculty, based on the institution's demographics (NCES, 2018). The percentage of full-time, first-time African American students who began their studies in Fall 2011 and

received a degree or award within the 150% of normal time to completion for their program was 34.1% (NCES, 2018).

University 2 is an historically Black public college and university (HBCU) also located in a southern state. It is a traditional 1890 land grant institution that functions as a teaching, research, and public service institution, including extension programs. The current enrollment is 6,106 students, inclusive of undergraduates and graduates. The overall retention rate is 61%, and the overall graduation rate is 24% (NCES, 2018). The African American population is 5,582 students, which is 91% of the total enrollment based upon the student demographics (NCES, 2018). According to NCES (2018), the 6-year graduation rate for first time, full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at 4-year degree-granting institutions in fall 2011 was 60.4%. By 2017, 60.4% of students had completed a bachelor's degree at the same institutions where they started in 2011 (NCES, 2018).

The 6-year graduation rate was 60.4% at all 4-year institutions, 59.7% at public institutions, 66.5% at private nonprofit institutions, and 20.8% at private for-profit institutions. According to NCES (2018), the overall 6-year graduation rate was 63% for females and 57.3% for males, which was higher for females than for males at both public (62.4% vs. 56.6%) and private nonprofit (69% vs. 63%) institutions. However, at private for-profit institutions, males had a higher 6-year graduation rate than females at 21.7% vs. 20.1% (NCES, 2018).

In today's society, more than half of students with dreams and aspirations of receiving a college degree do not reach that goal, and this is particularly true with African

American males (Bryan, Johnson, & Williams, 2016). According to Harper and Wood (2015), two-thirds of African American undergraduate males who start at a public college or university do not graduate within 6 years. This is the lowest college completion rate among both sexes and all numerically significant racial groups in United States' higher education. Retention and graduation rates for African American males have always lagged behind their counterparts, and this situation still exists today (Brooms, 2018).

Students' graduation and retention rates are often discussed in higher education. According to Boykin (2017), statistical graduation data represents an important concern in most American colleges. Colleges have implemented many programs and initiatives to increase graduation and retention rates, but, in the case of African American males, few of these have had a significant impact (Brooms, 2018). In the majority of colleges and universities, programs and services such as new student orientation, first-year experience, and student support services have been an integral part of higher education for many years. The demographics of higher education have changed over the past several years. Changes in technology, institutional expectations, and students' additional needs have resulted in higher retention and graduation rates (Drury & Brooms, 2019).

African American males' low college enrollments and low rates of baccalaureate degree completion are among the most pressing and complex issues in American higher education (Anumba, 2015). Institutional leaders and administrators can perpetuate the achievement gap of African American males or can develop strategies for eliminating low retention and graduation rates. The moment upper administration makes closing the

gap a top priority, and when they plan, allocate resources, and design accountability measures to do so, progress can be made (Farmer & Hope, 2015).

Definition of Terms

The following terms listed below are defined for the context of this study:

Achievement gap: The U.S. Department of Education describes the achievement gap as the difference in academic performance between different ethnic, gender, and linguistic groups (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

African American: Describes individuals of African descent born in the United States (Hall, 2017).

Attrition rates: Describes a decrease of student numbers resulting from low persistence and retention rates (Gross, 2017).

Educational attainment: Refers to the highest level of education that an individual has completed (NCES, 2018).

Full-time student: A person registered for 12 or more credit hours per semester, or the equivalent, at a postsecondary institution (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Graduation rate: The percentage of a school's first-time, first-year undergraduate students who complete their program within the published time for the program (U.S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Higher education: Education beyond secondary level, especially education provided by a college or university (Pabon, 2016).

Matriculation: The formal process of entering a college or university or becoming eligible to enter by fulfilling certain academic requirements (Harper, 2016).

Persistence: A number of consecutive courses completed during any given academic period within a student's college enrollment. Used interchangeably with the term *retention* (Wood & Harris, 2015).

Retention: Continuous enrollment in a college degree program until the point of completion (Brooms, 2017).

Social integration: Successful interactions in college activities with peers and/or with faculty (Bir & Myrick, 2015).

TRIO programs: Federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantage backgrounds; originally three, now expanded to eight (U. S. Department of Education. Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Significance of the Study

The goal of this study was to add to the growing research on African American males who successfully enrolled, remained, and persisted to graduation. The goal of this study is twofold: first, to explore college experiences of African American male students related to their academic success, and second, to better understand the perception of factors influencing their retention and graduation rates. My intent was to gain insight

about the college experiences, both academic and social, which best engaged, retained, and aided the participants to persist toward graduation.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify college experiences that had a positive impact on retention and success during college, as perceived by African American males. The institutions in the study were both public 4-year institutions. One was considered to be a PWI and the other was a HBCU. The perceptions of African American male students in good academic standing appeared to be lacking, based on the literature review. The literature is replete with research focusing on African American male student attrition and noncompletion of degree programs. In contrast, this research has resulted in a scholarly assessment of what is needed, from the perspective of successful African American male students, to achieve degree completion.

The focus on student attrition and noncompletion of degree programs has resulted in a plethora of programs and efforts based on institutions' notions of student deficits in preparation, background, and institutional integration. However, these approaches have left the voices of academically successful African American male students silent. Thus, in this study, I explored how academically successful African American male students perceived their college experiences and how those experiences impacted their retention and graduation success. Considering these success experiences may provide a new understanding of student achievement that can be shared throughout the higher education community.

Research Questions

The problem at the local study site was that African American males from two

public 4-year institutions were not graduating from college, as compared to all other ethnic groups and genders. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify college experiences that had a positive impact on retention and success during college, as perceived by African American males. The research questions guiding this study identified college experiences such as faculty, tutorial support, student activities, joining organizations, campus life, advising, and mentoring groups that had a positive impact on retention and success during college, from the perspective of African American male students. These experiences were viewed by the participants as vital components that impacted their retention and graduation success.

RQ 1: What campus experiences are perceived by African American male students to have had the most impact on their retention and success?

RQ 2: What are the differences in the campus experiences at HBCUs versus PWIs that emerge from the perceptions of African American males at the different institutional types?

Review of the Literature

African American male students' low rates of enrolling, persisting, and graduating from college are topics that have been the subject of considerable research. The majority of research has focused on the maladjustments, lack of preparation or readiness, and other factors seemingly precluding African American males from succeeding in colleges and universities (Bell, 2014; Brooms, 2014; Clay, 2012; Flores & Park, 2013; Harper, 2014; John & Stage, 2014). The following search terms were used to search the literature: *achievement gap, African American, attrition rates, educational attainment, focus group,*

full-time student, graduation rate, higher education, matriculation, perception, persistence, retention, and social integration. The databases that were used in identifying relevant literature for the study included ERIC, Education Research Complete, Education Source, Pro Quest Central, Google Scholar, and Sage Premier.

Conceptual Framework

Of important relevance to later studies on African American student retention and, in particular, African American males in higher education, was the work of Astin (1975) and Tinto (1975). By conducting a longitudinal study of college persistence, Astin's seminal work on college success and failure focused on student involvement or engagement. Astin discovered factors contributing to student persistence that correlated to student involvement in college life. Lack of involvement was one important factor that can influence or impact a student's decision to drop out of an institution. Student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy the student devotes to the academic experience as stated by Astin (1984).

Soon after Astin's (1975) initial work, two main characteristics of student involvement or engagement were also identified by additional researchers Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2006). In the book, *What Matters to Student Success*, (Kuh, et al., 2006), explains the importance of creating conditions in college that foster student success. Their main observation included the amount of time and effort institutions put into organizing sufficient learning opportunities, resources, curriculum, and support services to encourage student participation in various activities because such

activities affect experiences and outcomes of persistence, learning, graduation, and satisfaction on campus (Kuh, et al., 2006).

Tinto (2007) introduced several studies focused on student retention, persistence, and attrition rates in higher education. In fact, the theoretical framework used in this study to understand student attrition and persistence is Tinto's (1975) student integration model. This model of attrition was designed to offer a longitudinal representation which would explain all of the aspects and processes that influenced an individual's decision to leave an institution. These studies by Tinto (1975, 2007) provided foundational insight on retention and attrition rates in higher education.

The scholarly work of Astin and Tinto influenced the perspectives of Harper (2012), whose research addressed the importance of understanding African American males in higher education. Bell (2014) provided relevant research on the retention and graduation rates of African American males in higher education. Harper and Bell were among the first to specifically address African American males from a point of view based on success rather than the use of a deficit model in identifying reasons for African American male student failure. Identifying successes instead of failures is a great way to provide solutions for challenges faced by African American males in higher education. This seminal research was critical in the formulation of this study.

Review of the Broader Problem

Enrollment Decline

There are many possible reasons for enrollment declines, including economic cycles. In a shrinking economy, more people tend to seek higher education as a way to

improve their employment prospects. In an improving economy, that surge will typically recede (Anderson, 2015). Baker, Andrews, and McDaniel (2017) noted that nearly half of all first-time undergraduates take a loan to pay for college, and many students will borrow tens of thousands of dollars by the time they leave. Low-income students and students of color borrow more often and in larger amounts yet attend less selective institutions and are more likely to drop out with debt (Baker et al., 2017). Among students who complete college, those with larger amounts of debt may struggle to pay back their loans or to invest in a house, family, or future education. Additional information has begun to reveal how the availability and use of student loans affects college access, educational attainment, and life after college. The topic of college access and educational attainment has important implications for economic inequality and social stratification (Gross, 2017). Many African American males have discussed their difficulty to stay in college when economic times are hard (Haywood & Sewell, 2016). Additionally, many have felt as though it is their duty to work and help support their family. For many African American males, the choice to drop-out seems to be the right option. Therefore, institutions need intervention plans and counseling to help this population navigate through and complete their degree.

Pathway to College

According to Mincey, Turner, Brown and Maurice (2017), the pathway to college is not equal for everyone, as students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and minorities often face difficult challenges in trying to obtain a college education. African American males have consistently reported having their academic abilities and talents

questioned, negated, or attributed to affirmative action, athletics, or program/scholarships related to their race or socioeconomic status (Hawkins-Jones, 2017). With this, it is important to note that Harper (2016) found and Mincey et al. (2017) concurred that when African Americans were stereotyped on campus (e.g., when their intellectual abilities were contested due to race), they had feelings of confusion, resentment, anxiety, avoidance, and fear, which led to a lack in sense of belonging at the institution. African American males enroll in college because it provides a means to an end and an answer to their needs for academic intelligence, financial stability, and a better quality of life (Dancy & Hotchkins, 2015). However, researchers have also indicated that many African American men are unable to have a better quality of life because they often leave campus before they graduate (Harris, 2018). The number of students of color enrolling in higher educational institutions is expected to increase among African Americans and other groups. Due to increases in minority enrollments, minority-serving institutions (PWI, HBCU, Hispanic-serving, and tribal colleges and universities) continue to play a major role in educating students of color (John & Stage, 2014).

Administrators, scholars, faculty, and students continue to actively discuss the socioeconomic and educational plight of African American males and their declining enrollment, retention, and graduation from higher education (Brooms, 2018). The majority of the research has focused on traditional-age students and increasing their success. Therefore, evidence suggests that most decisions by traditional-age African American males to drop out of college may be caused by several factors, including lack of financial aid, sociocultural challenges, and institutional incompatibility (Landis, 2019).

Regardless of the factors, it is vital to bridge the education gap of African American male students and decrease drop-out rates.

Academic Preparation for College

Much of the initial literature on the lack of African American male student success in college has tended to focus on the lack of academic preparation and their consequent readiness for higher education. Pabon (2016) stated that academic unpreparedness or inadequate preparation prior to entering college is convolutedly linked to African American males' ability to develop the necessary skills to compete and meet the demands of college before they arrive on campus. Other researchers have noted that African American males are less prepared for the rigors of college-level coursework in comparison to peers from other racial groups (Holloway, 2018), which may contribute to their lack of engagement in college classrooms, clubs, structured campus activities, and impactful educational experiences outside the classroom (Hussein, 2017). Hamilton (2018) employed qualitative methods to study the achievement experiences of 12 African American men at multiple schools in Southern California. Hamilton found several nonacademic or noncognitive variables that were perceived to be instrumental to their success, including attachment to college, personal/emotional adjustment, social adjustment, and a strong support person. Landis (2019) suggested that support persons may be peer mentors. Initial recommendations to address the plight of traditional-age African American college students include increased attention to mentoring, as mentors have the potential of assisting African American males in negotiating the enormous intricacies of the higher educational pipeline (Small, 2017).

Holloway (2018) arrived at the conclusion that African American males are generally less prepared for the rigors of college-level coursework in comparison to peers from other racial groups. The researcher observed that this may contribute to the students' lack of engagement in college classrooms, clubs, structured campus activities, and impactful educational experiences outside the classroom. Thus, Holloway suggested that academic success impacts the level of engagement in campus life, which may result in attrition.

African American Male Academic Success

Grant's (2019) perspective of academic success suggested that African American males lack the social skills needed to persist in higher education. Adams-King (2016) explained that many African American males lack the skills, social and otherwise, to effectively compete in today's college classrooms. Jennings (2018) has also suggested that preparing African American males for socialized learning environments is vital to the overall academic success. Mitchell (2018) studied the institutional needs of African American males and discovered several interventions, such as mentoring, increased African American males' engagement on a college campus. According to Douglas (2017), the development and successful implementation of retention and mentoring programs for African American male students at both HBCUs, and PWIs is critical for African American males' success. African American males need additional support on campus and assurance from faculty or staff that everything is going to be fine.

African American Male Campus Engagement

Conversely, the lack of campus engagement and involvement with campus life is a causal factor in the lack of academic success of African American males (Brooms, 2018). Kamm (2018) focused on highlighting policies, programs, and resources that support African American males' success in college. Druery and Brooms (2019) also shared how involvement both in and out of the classroom afforded access to opportunities for leadership and involvement on campus. Harper (2004) interviewed 32 high achieving African American males from six PWIs in the Midwest: University of Illinois, Indiana University, University of Michigan, Michigan State University, The Ohio State University, and Purdue University. The criteria for the selection of participants were provided to high-ranking university officials who nominated the participants. Harper (2016) was interested in gaining insight into student perceptions on opportunities they believed were afforded to them due to their involvement in on-campus experiences. Harper examined the extent to which students benefitted from the relationships they established with faculty and administrators and the extent to which their experiences contributed to the building of skills and competencies necessary to in-class learning. According to Harper, these experiences are key components for African American male students. Positive experiences help build confidence and self-worth for many African American male students, and this promotes the determination to acquire their degree.

African American Male Student Success

Other studies yield findings that are consistent with Hamilton's (2018) conclusions. For instance, Harper (2004) studied the experiences of 32 high-achieving

(i.e., grade point average > 3.0) African American males and discovered that active involvement in clubs and organizations added value to their collegiate experience by enhancing their practical skills and offering various perks such as meeting dignitaries and key administrators. Based upon evidence from these studies, non-cognitive factors play an important role in promoting African American males' success in college.

African American males' troubled status in higher education has garnered attention at national conferences, in the media, and in published scholarship over the past 20 years. As the complexities of the problem slowly become clearer, educators, administrators, and policy makers alike grapple with the question of what must be done to improve African American males' student success. Retention among African American male students have plagued higher education for decades (Hall, 2017). Gross's (2017) concepts have contributed to the study of African American male students with regard to retention and attrition. Retention is a crucial measurement of success at any institution. As more students are retained, the rate of graduation increases. Students' success is equivalent to higher retention and graduation rates.

African American Male College Withdrawal

Students withdraw from college for a variety of reasons. Some may be because of institutional mishaps and others are more personal, but much of this reality is simply not well understood. Although reports from NCES (2018) show that African American males' enrollment is increasing, graduation rates for this group continue to decline. According to NCES (2018), 34% of African American males who started college

graduated within six years. This college completion rate is the worst among both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups.

Many institutions continue to provide an array of programs and activities to support the retention efforts of African American males, but the statistics remain the same; below average (NCES, 2018). Grier-Reed and Wilson (2016) shared their experience with the African American Student Network, where supportive relationships between African American students were developed and cultured. Participants were shown to have higher rates of retention and graduation than non-participant counterparts, even after considering academic factors. In noting poor academic success of African American and other low-income and first-generation students, Opidee (2015) suggested that many of these students face day-to-day challenges as they attempt to deal with social, classroom, financial, and administrative challenges that are more familiar to second and third generation students and families. Williams and Ferrari (2015) found, along the same lines, that first-generation students of color had a less well-developed sense of what the authors term *studentship*, the ability to successfully navigate student responsibilities and campus life than did more experienced students.

African American Male Challenges Graduating

Considerable attention has been devoted in recent years to the status and experiences of college men of color, particularly African American male undergraduates with their many challenges of earning a college degree. Farmer and Hope (2015) offered some factors that have been recently documented about these populations:

The 6-year graduation rate for African American males at 4-year public institutions and private nonprofit colleges is less than 40%. Their research suggested that persistence toward degree attainment is a problem. Results revealed that students with higher high-school grade point averages (GPAs) were more likely to be retained and graduate than those with lower GPAs. Students with higher first semester GPAs were more likely to be retained and graduate than those with lower first semester GPAs. Additionally, residents of the state were most likely to be retained than nonresidents (pp. 4-17).

Research has led to authors offering additional information and perceptions of the African American male students' challenges on college and university campuses. Brooms (2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2017), described a strong case for the importance of identity development in the support of African American males' success on campus. Brooms stressed the *pathways* to positive identity development and examples of programs designed to support these efforts, including the effort to create social cohesion among African American males referred to by the author as the Black Male Initiative. Brooms collaborated with Perry (2016) to demonstrate to readers how African American men create meaning from their personal realities and how they connect with the reality of Black life in America.

Retention

Retention is a vital component for all institutions. Understanding the process of retaining all students has been important for many decades. Hamilton (2018) employed qualitative methods to study the achievement experiences of 12 African American men at

multiple schools in Southern California. Hamilton (2018) found several non-academic or non-cognitive variables, which were perceived to be instrumental to their success, including attachment to college, personal/ emotional adjustment, social adjustment, and a strong support person. Other studies on African American male academic achievements yield findings that are consistent with Hamilton's (2018) conclusions and other authors such as Harper (2012), Jennings (2018), and Strayhorn (2017). Harper (2004) studied the experiences of 32 high-achieving (i.e., grade point average > 3.0) African American males and discovered that active involvement in clubs and organizations added value to their collegiate experience by enhancing their practical skills and offering various perks such as meeting dignitaries and key administrators. Based upon evidence from these studies, it appears that non-cognitive factors play an important role in promoting African American males' success in college.

Buckley's (2019) study also revealed that African American males entering college rely extensively on their peers for social and personal support. The campus or yard, as it was referred to by some of the participants, served as the foundation from which the exploration and participation in campus activities and organizations emerge. For many African American males, the campus culture is important in relation to their sense of belonging. As students are integrated and become engaged with the institution, they are more likely to persist to graduation (Douglas, 2017). Higher levels of integration into academic and social communities on campus lead to higher levels of institutional commitment and those engaged in campus activities showed increased levels of cognitive and skill development.

Minority Institutions

Gasman, Nguyen, and Commodore (2017) suggested that the importance of minority-serving institutions will continue to rise, and they identify the specific support they bring to students in comparison to their non-minority-serving institutional colleagues. In reviewing African American and other first-generation students' initial campus choices, Druery and Brooms (2019) note that the importance of the campus focus on serving these students is becoming more important. Hall (2017) provides perspective on whether or not the choice of an HBCU is likely to provide a good "fit" for most African American male students, but also noting a large number of famous and successful HBCU alumni. Hall (2017) discussed the many challenges that are faced by HBCU institutions and speculate on the future continued relevance of HBCU institutions.

College experiences impact the overall retention and graduation rates for African American male students. Many programs such as mentoring, Black male initiatives, leadership activities, and student organizations have been the saving grace for African American male students. Such programs have provided opportunities for students at risk. These programs have provided opportunities for students at risk, and also provided a safe space to gain confidence needed to persevere and complete their degree. My study examined these specific college experiences shared by African American males at two public 4-year institutions. Although the background and demographics of the two institutions were very different, many of the challenges encountered by the African American males on their respective campuses were similar.

Implications

Although there is a body of research on the persistence and success of African Americans in higher education, it is important to note that much of the literature has a focus on the education environment and the active participation of the African Americans in the life of the campus. Such findings support the anti-deficit perspective of African American male students suggested by Harper (2015). The literature appears to strongly support that a college environment that establishes programs and services that stimulate social and academic growth and promote African American males' cultural awareness, as well as interpersonal relationships with peers and faculty, could impact perseverance to degree completion. Particularly for African American males, having interactive experiences through programs and services, in addition to the classroom setting, could build confidence and create a more supportive campus climate, which may foster increased retention and graduation rates. Consequently, based upon these focus group sessions, many of the participants mentioned similar experiences through programs and activities that have been beneficial in degree completion.

With regards to public institutions such as HBCUs and PWIs, this project provides the students' perspectives based upon their engagement on campus, which is a foundation for TRIO and student affairs professionals to gain a better understanding of student life on campus. Although the literature review shows that there is a significant amount of information addressing retention and graduation for African American males; there is only a limited amount of research addressing the issues from the students' perspective.

Although it was difficult to predict findings of this research, I attempted to distinguish the positive impacts on retention and graduation rates, summarizing the

findings in a position paper. The objective of the study and subsequent position paper was to provide insight and understanding of the PWI versus HBCU experience from the students' perspective and its subsequent effect on retention and graduation. I initially attempted to develop a 3-day professional development training, however, decided against the training because of the plight of information from the students would possibly be neglected in this setting. I considered a curriculum plan, however, the qualitative study provided valuable information for both institutions that would positively impact African American males in and out of the classroom. Many of the statements from the students stressed concerns outside of the academic realm of the institution. As a result, recommended strategies to improve retention and graduation rates were influenced by a deeper understanding of the overall experience at the PWI and HBCU campuses. Therefore, the position paper was the best project and recommendations were developed for implementation on both campuses.

Summary

In section 1 of this study, I described the problem of retention and graduation rates of African American males in higher education. The rationale for selecting this problem was that many institutions of higher learning struggle to resolve and improve the retention and graduation rates of African American males. The goal of the research was shared, key terms were identified, and a thorough review of relevant literature was conducted, as knowledge of the issue on a local and national level justifies the importance of the study. The literature presented identified primary factors that influence whether African American males will successfully persist from enrollment into post-

secondary education to graduation. Scholars such as Astin (1993), Bell (2015), Harper (2006), Kunjufu (1997), Pascarella (1980), and Tinto (1987), agreed that support in the form of academic integration and social integration plays an important role in the retention rates. Prior education preparation, academic and social integration, and financial support are factors that relate to African American males who persist to graduation. In section 2, I reviewed the qualitative methodology and included a rationale for research design and approach with a description of the plan for data collection and analysis procedures. Section 3 describes the project, which consisted of a position paper for TRIO and student affairs professionals at both participating universities. This method was selected because it provided the most value from the research study. Section 4 discusses reflections and conclusion of the research, including project strengths and limitations, recommendations, implications, applications and future research suggestions. This section of the project study provided aspects of how the results informed solutions; ways to positively impact retention and graduation. The study was inspiring to me, because I am an African American male, low-income, and first-generation college graduate. I relate to many of the participants in this study, therefore felt a heightened sense of motivation to identify experiences that have positively impacted retention and graduation rates.

Section 2: The Methodology

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

In an effort to explore college experiences that have increased retention and graduation rates based upon the perceptions of African American males at two public 4-year institutions, I chose to use a qualitative research design. There are many reasons this design was best suited for the study. One was that a qualitative design is embedded in a constructivist paradigm, which portrays a society in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever changing (Gaus, 2017). Qualitative research provides an opportunity for the researcher to understand human experiences at the individual level and from the individual's perspective (Silverman, 2016). Qualitative inquiries are a process of understanding based on a distinct methodological tradition of inquiry. Such methods can be used to explore social or human problems in order to build a holistic picture or report a finding based on a natural setting for a convincing interpretation (Creswell, 1998). This qualitative study took place on the participants' campus; therefore, data were easily obtained.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify college experiences that had a positive impact on retention and success during college as perceived by African American males. Phenomenology has been considered an "educational qualitative research design," whose roots stem from the discipline of Philosophy (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 101). The phenomenological qualitative research method was best for this study because it is used to describe how human beings experience a certain phenomenon. A phenomenological study attempts to set aside biases and preconceived assumptions about

human experiences, feelings, and responses to a particular situation (Van Manen, 2017). Phenomenology mainly aims at understanding the underlying meaning of participants lived or common experiences (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). In learning, human action is focused on finding new meanings and explanations for things. Phenomenology does not put forward anything before and during the research process. It does not give explanations and logical inferences for situations. Phenomenology is only interested in an existent situation that is imaginative or a real-life experience. It focuses on only the descriptions of an individual's perceptions. Phenomenology describes the way in which humans make sense of their everyday life/world from their own perspective (Cho, 2000).

Rahman (2017) explained that quantitative research involves a collection of data to test a hypothesis or answer the research questions. Using this method makes it difficult to control or predict the expected outcome and establish relationships between the participants. Quantitative research is also challenging with regard to gaining insights of achievement levels and expected outcomes of successful retention and graduation rates among African American male students. A qualitative study was considered more appropriate based on the questions I sought to answer.

The guiding research questions aimed to identify specific college experiences that have impacted retention and graduation success. It is important to understand persistence from the perspective of the participants to better comprehend experiences that supported their academic success. Additionally, identifying common practices that would be considered relevant to a successful educational experience for all African American males is vital. Merriam & Tisdell (2015) asserted that phenomenological studies focus on

the overall essence of an experience. Therefore, usage of a phenomenological study for this research allowed insights that can support the enrichment of African American males' college enrollment and inspire similar studies to be conducted using similar methods based.

RQ1: What campus experiences are perceived by African American male students to have had the most impact on their retention and success?

RQ2: What are the differences in the campus experiences at HBCUs versus PWIs that emerge from the perceptions of African American males at the different institutional types?

The research findings from the analysis of the data provided by the study can provide information necessary to support African American males' retention and graduation success. Although scholars in the educational field have conducted qualitative studies related to African American males' enrollment status in higher education, Nealy (2009), O'Keeffe (2013), Matthews-Whetstone & Scott (2015), and Johnson (2018) specifically studied PWIs and HBCUs. Harper and Wood (2015) indicated various factors affecting African American male students' persistence, retention, and graduation challenges. Although previous researchers explored problems African Americans face, including African American males, few have researched factors such as college experiences promoting the success of African American males (Landis, 2019). This study allowed for a more qualitative dialogue in which perspectives from the participants can be understood and then used to explain how collegiate experiences impact retention and graduation.

Participants

Prior to communicating with participants, I acquired approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB (Approval No. 04-19-16-0324098) ensures that all Walden University research complies with the university's ethical standards as well as U.S. federal regulations (Walden University IRB for Ethical Standards in Research, 2014). Specifically, the IRB approval assured there was informed consent and equitable procedures, along with minimized and reasonable risks, and the potential benefits of the research outweighed the risks (Walden University IRB for Ethical Standards in Research, 2014). The process and scope of the research provided the IRB an explanation of how data would be collected and analyzed and the methods I used to protect the participants at University 1 and University 2.

University 1 was a public PWI, which is a research-intensive, internationally recognized technological university located in a southern state in the United States. The institution's enrollment was 9,736 students, inclusive of undergraduates and graduates for the 2018-2019 academic year. The African American population consisted of 973 students, which is only 10% of the total student population (NCES, 2018).

University 2 was a public, mainly African American university (HBCU), which is a traditional 1890 land grant institution that functions as a teaching, research, and public service institution. This institution is also located in a southern state in the United States. The enrollment was 6,106 students, inclusive of undergraduates and graduates for the 2018-2019 academic year. The African American population consisted of 5,556 students, which is 91% of the total enrollment (NCES, 2018). Table 2 describes research

institutions' enrollment retention rates and graduation percentages based upon the 6-year expectancy.

Table 2

Institution's Enrollment, Retention, and Graduation Expectancy

Institution	Total enrollment	Retention rate	Graduation rate 6-year cohort
University 1 (PWI)	9,736	83%	52%
University 2 (HBCU)	6,106	61%	27%

Note. Source: National Center for Educational Statistics (2018)

Purposeful Sampling

In alignment with a phenomenological research design, purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest. As described by McMillian (2012), purposeful sampling is advantageous in several ways such as (a) being less costly, (b) being less-time consuming, (c) usually obtains high participation rates, (d) adds credibility to research, and (e) ensures receipt of the necessary information. The sample of participants was obtained through the help of purposeful snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is where research participants recruit other participants for a test or study (Morgan, 2008). In this particular study, student affairs and TRIO professionals at the designated institutions were provided information as a reference to my interests in organizing a focus group to conduct research about college experiences leading to successful retention and graduation rates for African

American male students. The professional staff at both institutions assisted me by forwarding this information to potential participants.

Additionally, university staff members identified an African American male student leader on their campus to assist with recruiting other African American male undergraduate and graduate students to participate in the focus groups. Any student who met the criteria was able to participate in the study. Students self-identified as interested in participating by contacting me via phone or email. Once students expressed interest in the focus group, they were provided the Research Study Introductory Letter (see Appendix B), which provided more detailed information about the study, participant qualifications, and information about the research and researcher. After reviewing the Research Study Introductory Letter (see Appendix B) and confirming their participation, I provided them with a Participant Consent Form. A participant consent form is not simply about the student giving permission to be involved in the research; it is an agreement between the researcher and the research participant outlining the roles and responsibilities they are taking towards one another throughout the entire research process. Participants were encouraged to email and/or call within 5 days of receiving the invitation to confirm their participation. Seven to 10 days prior to the actual focus group sessions, participants were contacted to ensure they were still participating and were provided the exact time and location of the focus group session on their campus. One week prior to the focus group session, I was available daily from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. for any last-minute questions or concerns.

Each participant identified himself racially and by gender as an African American male. All participants were undergraduate and graduate alumni students. Participants' academic classifications ranged from sophomore through first year graduate school. They represented a wide range of majors and minors but all were in good academic standing.

I was able to establish a great deal of trust with the participants by assuring protection from risks, confidentiality, anonymity, and engagement. The informed consent was part of the initial efforts of establishing trust. Additionally, because the participants were not familiar with me and would be meeting for the first time in the focus group, I dressed professionally but worked to create an atmosphere that was relaxing and conducive to open and honest conversations. Refreshments were provided for all participants, and they were engaged in rapport-building conversations before the sessions began, which set the tone for the researcher-participant relationship. Students were not compensated in any way for participating in the focus groups.

The goal was to identify 12 to 16 African American participants at each institution. To be eligible for the study, participants needed to be

- African American,
- Full-time student,
- Current sophomore, junior, senior, and graduate students/alumni in good academic standing, and
- Over the age of 18.

Ideal participants volunteered, who were eligible based on the requirements. The research sample included 30 African American males, enrolled full-time as sophomores,

juniors, senior, and graduate students who were deemed in good academic standing at their institutions. The 16 participants from University 1 included three sophomores, five juniors, four seniors, and three graduate students. Fourteen participants from University 2 included three sophomores, four juniors, four seniors, and three graduate students. Tables 3 and 4 describe the participants' demographic breakdown for each university.

Table 3

Participant Demographic Breakdown for University 1 (PWI)

Participants' pseudonym	Age	Classification	Major
Participant SM1U1	20 - 21	Sophomore	Aerospace Engineering
Participant SM2U1	18 -19	Sophomore	Mathematics
Participant SM3U1	18 - 19	Sophomore	Civil Engineering
Participant J1U1	20 -21	Junior	Electrical Engineering
Participant J2U1	20 - 21	Junior	Business Mgmt.
Participant J3U1	Over 23	Junior	Electrical Engineering
Participant J4U1	20 - 21	Junior	Biology
Participant J5U1	20 - 21	Junior	Chemistry
Participant S1U1	20 - 21	Senior	Industrial Engineering
Participant S2U1	22 - 23	Senior	Aerospace Engineering
Participant S3U1	22 - 23	Senior	Information Systems
Participant S4U1	22 - 23	Senior	Information Systems
Participant S5U1	22 - 23	Senior	Electrical Engineering
Participant G1U1	Over 23	Graduate	MBA
Participant G2U1	22 - 23	Graduate	Psychology
Participant G3U1	Over 23	Graduate	Biology

Note. Participant breakdown: 3 Sophomores, 5 Juniors, 5 Seniors, 3 Graduate Students

Table 4

Participant Demographic Breakdown for University 2 (HBCU)

Participants' pseudonym	Age	Classification	Major
Participant SM1U2	18 -19	Sophomore	Biology
Participant SM2U2	18 -19	Sophomore	Engineering
Participant SM3U2	20 -21	Sophomore	Engineering
Participant J1U2	20 -21	Junior	Apparel Design
Participant J2U2	20 -21	Junior	Business Mgmt.
Participant J3U2	20 -21	Junior	Sports Management
Participant J4U2	20 -21	Junior	Urban Planning
Participant S1U2	20 -21	Senior	Communications
Participant S2U2	20 -21	Senior	Food Science & Technology
Participant S3U2	Over 23	Senior	International Business
Participant S4U2	20 -21	Senior	Criminal Justice
Participant G1U2	Over 23	Graduate	Civil Engineering
Participant G2U2	Over 23	Graduate	Political Science
Participant G3U2	Over 23	Graduate	MBA

Note. Participant breakdown: 3 Sophomores, 4 Juniors, 4 Seniors, and 3 Graduate students

Data Collection

The problem at the local study site was that African American males from two public 4-year institutions were not graduating from college, as compared to all other ethnic groups and genders. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify college experiences that had a positive impact on retention and success, as perceived by African American males. The overall goal for this study was to find ways that retention and graduation rates could be increased, based upon the perceptions of African American males in higher education.

Focus Group

The use of qualitative research allowed me to gather important information beyond traditional measures of success, such as persistence and graduation rates. Data was collected through semi-structured focus group interviews. According to Morgan (2018), focus group interviews allow the researcher to probe more deeply than with other forms of interviews. The researcher can interact with the participants, pose follow-up questions, and can effectively engage with the participants (Guest, Namey, Taylor, Eley, & McKenna, 2017). Focus group interviews also allow the researcher to obtain contextual information from non-verbal responses, such as facial expressions or body language (Morgan, 2018). Merriam & Grenier (2019) suggested focus interviews as a method of gaining information on past events that cannot be replicated, and knowledge about a person's feelings, behaviors and interpretation of events. Additionally, focus group interview sessions are presumed to have a better response rate (McMillan, 2012).

Nonetheless, as the researcher, I was cognizant of the problems that might occur

in using focus group interviews, such as (a) information filtered by view of interviewer, (b) interviewee providing information they think the interviewer wants to hear, and (c) small sample size. Consequently, special consideration was taken to mitigate these issues and provide a friendly, welcoming, and relaxed atmosphere that encouraged open, honest discussion. Additionally, the services of an external auditor were used to evaluate the findings for researcher bias and accuracy.

Two focus group sessions were held, one at each research institution. The size of the focus group sessions allowed them to be informative and productive, but also created a sense of community. The comfortable feeling during the session allowed the participants to freely respond to questions. Prior to beginning each session, the participants completed the Participant Information for Project Study (see Appendix D), reviewed and signed the informed consent, were apprised of and assented to the focus group session being audio recorded. The value of the audio recordings was that it allows for more accurate recording of statements. Knowing that the focus group interviews were being recorded also allowed me to focus on the flow of the conversations. The audio recordings were fully transcribed, and the following steps were taken to limit inaccuracies: state of the art digital voice recorder was used, the sessions were transcribed immediately over the next several weeks, and the sessions were played back countless times for validation.

The focus group sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes and were conducted on the participants' campus in a lecture room at a mutually convenient time for the participants. The participants at both institutions answered and discussed seven semi-

structured, open-ended questions (see Appendix C). During the focus group session, it was imperative for me to be mindful of time, so all participants had an equal opportunity to engage in the conversation.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research data analysis can be described as the process of making sense of research participants' views and opinions of situations, corresponding patterns, themes, categories, and regular similarities (Cohen et al., 2007). Data analysis in qualitative research is vital to other parts of the study, namely, the data collection and the findings. In the process of analysis for this study, I employed Creswell's (2012) recommended six steps which are (a) organization of data, (b) initial exploration through coding, (c) developing description and themes, (d) representation using narratives and visuals, (e) interpretation through personal reflection and literature, and (f) validation and accuracy. Data analysis involves the process of breaking down the information into smaller components to reveal the characteristics, elements, and structure of the content (Elliott, 2018). Additionally, Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) was used to easily and efficiently organize, sort, save and track data collected.

The research questions were used to make valid inferences from the participants' responses. Additionally, each participant was provided a *Participant Information for Project Study Form* (see Appendix D) for capturing basic demographic information, which remained confidential as stated in the *Participant Consent Form*. McMillan's (2012) recommended data organization was applied by identifying participants' wording

as emic data, and researcher representation of emic data as etic data. The process required constant review of the data to ensure accurate coding into classification and meaningful descriptions prior to the final interpretation and analysis of the data. Thus, an inductive synthesis of the research data lead to inferences, supported by visuals drawn from (CAQDAS). The recordings also provided direct quotes and observer's comments to substantiate findings.

All research is concerned with producing valid and credible knowledge in an ethical manner. Being able to trust the researcher and the results are extremely important. Regardless of the type of research, validity and reliability are concerns that can be approached through careful attention to the study's conceptualization and the way in which the data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted Merriam (1988). The researcher's career experience working with African American males improved the trust of the respondents and provided a deeper understanding of the participants' culture and context (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Nonetheless, I applied strategies for credibility and trustworthiness as described by Merriam & Tisdell (2015). First, I conducted regular critical self-reflection to ensure personal biases, assumptions, and views were not implicated in the analysis. Second, I provided detailed, meaningful descriptions of the students' comments, so readers could resonate with the participants based upon their individual experiences. Third, I conducted participant member checks, allowing each participant an opportunity to correct misconceptions of their views, if any were discovered. This was done by emailing each participant their transcripts for approval. Each participant had an opportunity to provide feedback to confirm accuracy and

credibility of the findings. Hence, if any participant desired, he could have met with me to discuss any edits. Fourth, I ensured an audit of methods, procedures, decisions, and all documentation pertaining to the research. Lastly, the findings were reviewed by an external auditor, a doctoral level administrator/adjunct faculty member from a local college who reviewed the data analysis (no student names or identification was provided) for appropriateness of themes, researcher bias, and findings based on the data (Creswell, 2012). The external auditor provided additional credibility to the study. The auditor agreed with my findings. He also confirmed that the data was grounded, inferences were logical, and researcher bias were eliminated. The intention is not to generalize data to the institution, but, as indicated by Berger, Blanco-Remirez, and Lyons, (2012), the study provided research results to support retention and graduation strategies utilized by each university.

Results

The problem at the local study site was that African American males from two public 4-year institutions were not graduating from college, as compared to all other ethnic groups and genders. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify college experiences that had a positive impact on retention and success, as perceived by African American males. The overall goal for this study was to understand the experiences of students who were successfully matriculating through their current degree program. After reviewing the focus group transcripts, I determined that both groups of participants encountered challenges on their campus. I held an expectation that the participants would speak about personal issues such as homesickness or personal matters that they identified

as obstacles. Both groups, however, discussed more issues associated with family, the campus environment, perceptions of students, and racial concerns. Also, based upon the focus group discussions, the responses to the questions developed into five main themes: (a) rationale for selecting university (b) family, (c) academic culture, (d) student life, and (e) racial consciousness and self-growth.

Rationale for Selecting University

The participants from University 1 provided a different perspective regarding their experiences on a predominantly White campus. Several of the students discussed why choosing this institution provided a sense of pride and competitiveness in the workforce when applying for jobs. One participant also mentioned how he had to be so much better than his White peers because of the academic environment of the campus. Participant S4U1 was adamant about the academic barrier he faced in college:

The academic barrier that I faced was the automatic perception that you do not know anything coming into a brand-new classroom being African American especially being the only African American male in the classroom. But my advice is to sit in the front of the classroom and answer every question and then by the end of the class you have a few people coming up to asking you? “Man, how did you figure that out? Then you just tell them, your work ethic and that is my way of telling the first day, firsthand that you are not what society portrays you as being African American.

According to a response from Participant J3U1, instructors expect every student to be knowledgeable of all material when it is presented. However, based upon the

academic background of participants, their high schools lacked the advanced placement or college preparatory courses that were much needed in the competitive post-secondary education climate. In addition, the university did not provide much additional support for African American males, as expressed by S1U1.

By comparison, eleven of the 14 participants that chose to attend the HBCU primarily grew up in inner city neighborhoods. Leaving their cities and coming to HBCU provided a sense of “making it out of the hood,” as stated by participant S3U2. Some of the participants chose to attend University 2 just because it was a family tradition. As participants discussed their hometown experiences, many of them brought up the gang violence, drug abuse, and high school dropouts in their communities. Overall, it seemed that a primary goal of enrollment at University 2 was the opportunity for self-improvement and a positive alternative to what was available in their home communities. Participant S3U2 expressed,

I grew up in the inner city of Chicago and my family had it rough, although I am the youngest of nine kids, I wanted to make my brothers and sisters proud by showing them you can go to college and earn a degree which will prepare me to have a better life than the one we grew up experiencing in Chicago.

In contrast to the HBCU students, many of the participants that chose to attend the PWI lived in small towns in rural areas such as the *Black Belt*, which is a term referring to a region in the United States with rich, black topsoil, that stretches through central Alabama and northeast Mississippi. Seemingly, this area was developed for cotton plantations based upon the enslaved African American labor; the term became associated

with these conditions. Although the goals and aspirations of the participants were similar, SM2U1 expressed the importance of escaping the rural areas and have a better life than the one in which his parents live now.

Family

When interview question one [What are the motivations and characteristics you possess that have contributed to your persistence to graduate from college...in essence, what experiences have contributed to your overall success in college thus far?] was asked to participants within both focus groups, the responses focused on family and future success. The part that parents play in the academic portion of African American males' lives have shown to be impressionable and impactful when measuring their ability to pursue and persevere in higher education (Strayhorn, 2017). Participant G1U2 very confidently affirmed his motivations by stating,

My motivations for me coming to college and actually being persistence, I'm the oldest of nine kids I'm setting a standard for my brother's and sister's so for me not to graduate is like setting a standard for them not to graduate at all. So, when I graduate tomorrow it's a sign for them to be there motivation to do it as well so hopefully there is ripple effect for them to be graduating from college.

Family was also extremely important based upon the responses from the students of both focus groups. The student participants from University 2 stressed the importance of their family many times during the discussion of motivations to persist to graduation. Participant SM1U2 stated, "I am a third-generation student here at University 2, so it was always the expectation of my family to go to college and earn your degree." Participant

G2U2 explained, “everyone in my family is a college graduate, so it was expected for me to graduate from undergrad and transition right into graduate school.” While not the result of direct experiences in college, it is clear that families play a huge part in students’ motivation for success.

Many participants stressed enrolling into college as a way to gain more opportunities for their careers once they graduate, based upon the dynamics of their home life circumstances. Participant J3U1 said, “my motivation to pursue my college degree is my mother, she is a single parent with sickle cell disease, and I want to make her proud.” Participant SM1U2 stated, “my father came to University 2 in 1999 and he didn’t graduate; now he is seeing the effects of employment opportunities, therefore I am motivated to complete my degree.” Participant S2U2 explained, “my parents both retired military so I had the opportunity to come to college for free through the G.I. Bill and do something they were unable to do in their life.” Participant SM3U1 expressed, “I just had a son and I want to ensure he will be okay in the future.” In a saddened voice, Participant J3U2 stated, “my mom passed away when I was in the 7th grade and I have two younger siblings. I just want to be a positive role model for them and show them that anything is possible.” Overall, many participants expressed the sentiment that they just wanted to make their parents proud.

Academic Culture

Interview Questions 2 [barriers] and 3 [challenges faced] yielded various responses related to academic culture and possible barriers each participant faced. The academic culture on every college campus is different. The enrollment, retention, and

graduation rates for African American males at 4-year colleges and universities in the United States are indefensible. The themes that emerged included academic preparedness, classroom setting, student-faculty relationship, mentors, academic advisors, among others. These interview question allowed the participants an opportunity to discuss the barriers and academic challenges faced at their perspective institution. Responses indicated that the rigorous curriculum at both institutions was challenging, but also many participants mentioned not being prepared mentally for the dedication and hard work it takes to be a successful college student. Participant SM2U1 stated,

I would say my barrier from high school was that grades came easily and then when I came to college, I thought it was going to be the same way and it was completely different. No study habits whatsoever, then when I received that first “F”, it turned me right around to where I was supposed to be. I knew coming to college, I had to study and being in high school where I didn’t have to simply because it came easy in high school, but college wasn’t so easy.

Based on their comments, the perceptions of the academic culture of their institutions were clearly different. At University 2, the focus group participants agreed that the high percentage of African American students, as well as faculty and staff on campus made the transition from the academic culture of their high school to that of University 2 fairly smooth. As Participant J2U2 mentioned, “my first day of class reminded me of my high school, which was a good thing for me.” Participant J2U2 and others in the group were clear that University 2, however, was academically challenging. Participant J2U2 continued, “I always made good grades in high school, but the academic

requirements here were much greater than I anticipated”. Participant J3U2 added, “with no study habits from high school, it was very difficult for me the first year and my grades suffered tremendously.” Although students had looked forward to a comfortable transition to the university, in reality there were many unexpected challenges.

In general, participants indicated agreement and expressed they needed additional academic support. Participant G3U 2 stated, “there are not enough tutors on campus, especially for the field of engineering.” This was a common complaint from many of the participants. Somewhat unexpected from an HBCU campus and unanticipated by the participant was the significant presence of professors from other countries who were not native English speakers. Participant S1U2 also raised the issue of non-native speakers, mentioning, “one particular area of academic concern was understanding the languages of the foreign professors.” Participant G3U2 echoed the same issue concerning professors who were not native English speakers. “The language of the instructors has been a little bit of a struggle for me especially during the first two years of undergrad.” As with most students, this clearly came as a surprise to the University 2 participants.

Based upon the responses from the participants, the academic culture at University 1 seemed to be one of high aptitude, challenging coursework, and renowned research and technology programs. The apparent roles of many faculty seemed to support this interpretation of the academic life, in that faculty at University 1 tended to be less available to students. It seemed assumed that faculty members were more highly involved in research, both individual and departmental. However, some students were appreciative of help from other sources. Participant G2U1 explained, “the school is large, but small in

demographics because many upper classmen are willing to assist younger students with coursework.” Participant S2U1 stated, “the reason I came to this PWI was to hopefully get a good job by graduating from the well-known engineering school.” Participant S1U1 proclaimed: “I had to teach myself a lot of the coursework material because many of the instructors are not available outside of regular class time.” As we discussed the academic culture, Participant G1U1 made a statement, “the professors are really smart and intelligent, but [just] because you are the sharpest tool in the shed doesn’t mean you are good in displaying your knowledge to the students in front of you.” The African American male students genuinely expressed their love for University 1 based upon its academic reputation and the future possibilities that would come from acquiring a degree. However, they were unprepared for the level of independent scholarship necessary to be successful at the institution.

Student Life

As open-ended questions three and four were addressed, participants referenced the impact of student life on campus. Campus culture and student life are significant factors that affect African American male’s achievement and attitudes during their collegiate experience. According to Miller (2019), being actively engaged in educational activities and experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, are more likely than their disengaged peers to matriculate through college and earn a college degree. The African American male students interviewed in this study generally experienced more adjustment issues on the PWI campus rather than at the HBCU. Sinanan (2016) reported African American males’ perceptions of and experiences with social receptivity at a PWI

can have a significant impact on the students' learning experience. Research has indicated that when students are enrolled at institutions with supportive environments (Twumasi, 2019), they experience greater satisfaction with college and are more likely to graduate. Moreover, when African American males have the opportunity to participate in higher education, and when well-conceived and formalized support systems are put into place to promote achievement, they succeed in academic settings (Landis, 2019). Nonetheless, the theme of student life includes the social experiences primarily based upon research question number five.

In order to highlight and understand the factors that most strongly contribute to African American male involvement on college campuses, it is important to understand several factors. Participant G2U2 stated: "I think the university should do a better job of building relationships with male students because African American males especially are not naturally open and receptive, not all of them." On the campus of University 2, participants mentioned having a comfortable feeling of being on a campus where the majority of students are of the same skin tone, however, a few of the participants shared concerns for student life. Participant S2U2 stated, "we need more leadership programs for males on campus because there are several aspects of life that I do not understand, such as managing money, developing good credit, and preparing for my future after college. Leadership programs that provide certain life skills are helpful for most students as they prepare for life in the real world.

During the focus group session at University 2, Participant G2U2 explained, "I was here to gain academic success and graduate within a certain timeframe; however, I

was more concerned with partying, joining social organizations and trying to live a lifestyle so I lost sight of my academic goals.” Eight of the 14 participants made comments pertaining to the fact there were few male role models on the campus. Participant S2U2 stated, “the institution needs to do more programs like a Male Leadership Summit, which would help African American males on campus development their leadership skills and also teach them the soft skills they would need in the real world.” Participant J3U2 supported that statement by saying, “I feel there should be a Mr. U2, because that would be another male figure on campus we could look up to as a role model, since we really do not have access to the President or other male administrators.” Participant S1U2 added, “I think more Black friendly events and programs would assist with the retention rates at the institution.” It is obvious that developing more programs and hiring more African American faculty would go a long way to supporting African American male students’ success in college.

Understanding the historical context of the African American male’s experience in the United States is one factor that permeates their lack of trust and distant behavior. Some of these experiences include the family dynamics, cultural and educational views, myths and stereotypes that shape how African American males’ interface with society. As stated by Participant G2U2, “African American males are not naturally open and receptive, that is why it is important for the institution to build better relationships with the African American males.” Participant S2U2 supported Participant G2U2’s statement by explaining, “it is important for the institution to have more programs specifically for the African American males.” During the focus group discussion, some participants at

University 2 expressed gratitude to have professors and administrators that looked like them, however, felt that administrators and professors were not familiar with their generation. Participant J3U2 said, “I think we need more professors who are in tune with what is going on in today’s society.” Participant J2U2 indicated: “we need more black leaders on our campus as well as more black professors because they will understand us.” Participant S3U2 explained, “the institution is very supportive of tradition, but I feel as a millennial, we learn and respond to information quite differently than the traditional student.” The challenge of younger generations feeling that older faculty do not understand them is not particular to African Americans, but should, nevertheless, be taken into consideration on college campuses.

In conclusion, all of the participants in both focus groups brought unique experiences and perspectives to share. A few areas where responses were almost the same on both the PWI and HBCU campuses were the lack of support from administrators, availability of male figures, and services for African American males. The perception of being on a HBCU campus may have seemed to be an advantage for African American males, but as this study has shown African American males are having difficulties on both types of campus.

Racial Consciousness and Self Growth

The students from U1 made frequent reference to their perceived status as African American men at a predominantly White institution. Student J2U1 put it in this way: “What motivates me is, when you attend a PWI, you have to outshine everybody in your class because you are the only black guy in most classes.” This perspective was affirmed

by other U1 students such as Student S1U1 who contributed: “many people here already have preconceived notions of African Americans, because they expect for us not to have this opportunity, so just proving them wrong is really my motivation.” Student S4U1 explained: “you can never let your guard down academically because that’s really what they want you to do.” “Additionally, we need more black leaders and teachers on campus, simply because they will understand us and we will have people to talk with about our struggles,” explained student J2U1. Regarding inclusion and self-worth, Participant S2U1 stated, “my friends that attend HBCUs go to class excited and I am here going to class trying to make sure I don’t get into any trouble or ‘stand out’ more than usual.” These students’ comments generated considerable agreement from other U1 students with verbal and non-verbal indication of agreement.

As might be expected, students from the HBCU did not specifically raise the point about standing out or having more Black events, but did express feelings about how the institution was important to them in their growth and awareness of being an African American male. Participant S2U2 proclaimed, “Prior to my arrival on campus, I heard there were so many events, programs and activities on campus that benefited all students especially African American males and the staff and administration worked very closely with students.” The participants at University 2 felt comfortable about their campus environment and obviously the events but warrant there are not enough programs for African American male students specifically. This was largely expressed as student G2U2 spoke of the institution:

The institution is pushing many of our male students back into their home

environments because when they are making life changing mistakes, faculty and administrators are not teaching them how to overcome and make better decisions. Most of them are just sent home with no intervention or counseling.

This student's response was "seconded" by student S3U2:

We have had sexual assault cases on campus and the university does nothing in trying to solve the problem. I think the university should look at this closely and say, 'How can we help our young men understand the implications of assaulting women' and how they should treat women. What programs or speakers could we provide for our African American males that would be beneficial in dealing with this problem?

While such feelings toward the institution were evident among the participants listed above, there were others with relevant expressions of disappointment with University 2 that seemed to indicate a lost opportunity for the institution to have greater impact. "I feel one definite thing we could improve was the quality of students who are eligible to enroll at the institution," as explained by student J3U2. Student J4U2 expressed adamantly,

I feel like this HBCU is underestimated and graduates do not demonstrate enough pride for the institution. I feel as though; people attend this university as a means to go elsewhere and earn their masters or doctorate degrees. Once they have moved on, they always mention the other colleges or universities and not particularly this HBCU in which they earned their undergraduate degree.

In summary, the topic of racial consciousness and self-growth was indicated by both focus groups as one of the considerable importance to African American men.

Although such considerations were expressed as motivations to choose an HBCU for college, there seemed to be substantial feelings to indicate a possible lost opportunity for the institution to have greater impact. Consequently, based upon the findings, African American male students had issues with racial consciousness and self-growth at both institutions. The vast difference was that U2 seemed a little more familiar because there were many more students who were also African American.

Summary

Through studying the college experiences of African American males, my research offers insight into the important personal and institutional elements that most impacted their educational journeys. Reflecting on the study's conceptual framework and literature review, these results affirm much of what is known through prior research, but in addition, contribute to greater clarity toward understanding how African American males can successfully matriculate through their college experience. The qualitative research design using the phenomenology approach assisted in identifying the particular challenges faced by the African American male population.

In Section 2 of this research study I provided a description of, and justification for, the qualitative research design and approach. I included the criteria for selecting participants, procedures for gaining access to participants, and measures for the ethical protections of participants, a narrative for establishing a relationship with participants, the method for data collections, the role of the researcher, data analysis procedures, and a synopsis on ensuring quality, credibility, and trustworthiness. The data analysis results were used to create the project in Section 3 derived from the responses of the seven open-

ended questions in the focus group sessions. The project is supported by a literature review to support and effectively implement the information designed in the position paper. The position paper (see Appendix A) is a summary of these perceptions comprised in an easily readable format for student affairs and TRIO professionals employed at these two research sites. Additionally, this position paper may inform other institutions in their efforts to retain and graduate African American male students.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

African American male students' retention and graduation rates have been a vital focus for higher education institutions for decades. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify college experiences that had a positive impact on retention and success during college, as perceived by African American males. The problem at the local study site was that African American males from two public 4-year institutions were not graduating from college, as compared to all other ethnic groups and genders. In this study, I focused on two public 4-year institutions in the southern United States. The information was gathered from focus group sessions in a small private lecture room on each respective campus. In grounded theory, focus group interviews provide unique opportunities to capture meaningful and complex information from participants (Kahn, 2014). The focus groups consisted of current students, enrolled full-time who identified themselves as African American males in good academic standing at their respective institutions. Although the sample size was limited, the results of this study provided a solid foundation for the assessment of the retention and graduation rates for African American males in higher education.

The project that developed from the study was a position paper. A position paper includes the background of existing problem and a summary of analysis and findings. It presents evidence from both literature and research. The paper can assist student affairs and TRIO professionals in efforts of making necessary changes within their campus

community to positively impact retention and graduation rates, specifically for African American male students.

Description and Goals

The problem addressed in this white paper (see Appendix A) is that of retention and graduation rates of African American males in two different institutional types. The study involved two relatively proximate institutions in a southern state, one HBCU and one PWI. The participants' perceptions of their college experience and its influence on their retention and graduation is an ideal topic to present in a position paper format. The position paper format allows for the illustration of research data in an easy-to-read document with a focus on recommended solutions. The position paper highlights key findings and their implications for practice to an identified audience. Thus, this position paper presents the experiences of participants and how those experiences influenced their retention, within the context of Broome (2016b), *Being Black, Being Male on Campus: Understanding and Confronting Black Male Experiences*.

The goals of the project were to (a) provide insight and understanding of the PWI and HBCU experiences from the perspective of the African American male students, (b) further explore the experiences of African American males at both universities within the context of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) key ingredients of the institution, and (c) recommend strategies to influence the retention and graduation rates.

As indicated by Prichard & Trowler (2018), the position paper highlights key findings and their implications for practice. As both institutions are proximate to each other, I anticipate that both staffs will be able to implement recommendations from the

position paper. Hopefully, the results from the perceptions shared by the students may produce several initiatives or enhancements to current programs and curricula on both campuses, with the goal of supporting African American male students and furthering the likelihood of their retention and academic success.

Summary of Analysis/ Findings

The project developed from the study data included findings and recommendations intended for senior administrations' consideration at both institutions. The position paper can be used with permission of leadership at both institutions, appropriate student affairs, and TRIO staff from both institutions. The position paper was intended to present the results from the focus groups and the recommendations that evolved from the themes: rationale for selecting university, family, academic culture, student life, and racial consciousness and self-growth. The bulk of the content from the paper focused on a professional discussion of the recommendations in terms of institutional applicability, ability to implement the recommendations, and the likelihood of their success. Hopefully, this project will directly impact student affairs and TRIO professionals, but administrators will also be needed to further develop the recommendations, resulting in possible modifications and action planning geared toward student success.

Rationale

Interviews provide unique opportunities to capture meaningful and complex information from participants (Kahn, 2014), and this was the case in the focus groups conducted for this study. The focus groups consisted of current students enrolled full-

time who identified themselves as African American males who were in good academic standing at their respective institutions. Although the sample size was limited, the results of this study provide a foundation for the continued consideration by the institutional administrations to address the success of African American males on their campuses. It is important for the respective institutional administrators to have an opportunity to review the thematic findings provided by the data collected in the study. It is also necessary to have the administrators support the implementation of the recommendations provided in the position paper. The recommendations are invaluable because they can provide first-person information to help universities who serve Black students to better meet their needs and positively impact their success.

Review of the Literature

Looking at national data regarding graduation rates by race, it is clear that disparities between students of color and their counterparts exist. According to Shapiro et al. (2017), the 6-year graduation rates at 4-year institutions show that African American students are the least likely to graduate (only 45.9% of students), followed by 55% for Hispanic students. These disparities are not isolated to first year college students, as completion rates of students transferring from community colleges also revealed differences by race. One in 4 in 5 Asian and 1 in 5 White transfer students graduated, while only 1 in 10 and 1 in 13 Hispanic and Black students graduated, respectively (Shapiro et al., 2017). However, this focus places the blame with the individual, rather than looking at the problem in a more comprehensive manner. Less attention has been paid to opportunities, both in schools and outside of schools, that allow for preparation

for college, career readiness, and citizenship (Dulabaum, 2016). Opportunity gaps can exist in terms of health, housing, nutrition, safety, and enriching experiences (Bell, 2015). Such opportunity gaps exist well before students enter institutions of higher learning and can ultimately impact access and achievement. However, the literature review in this study provides valuable research on the opportunity gaps to persistence for students of color who are already enrolled in colleges and universities and ways to mediate against these disparities. Persistence can be considered as ones' ability to remain enrolled (retention) or complete a degree at an institution of higher education (NCES, 2017).

Institutions of higher learning in the United States are charged with addressing the preexisting and current opportunity gaps that may impact academic performance and outcomes between students of color and their peers. However, many fall short of addressing inequities in terms of academic engagement and persistence (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Frequently discussed but rarely accomplished is the initiative to engage African American males in culturally enriching environments (Druery & Brooms, 2019). Many challenges to arriving at these objectives exist. Although this may be difficult, providing unique opportunities for this population will pay dividends for their future (Farmer & Hope, 2015). It is imperative for institutions to invest in the African American males on their respective campuses if the ultimate goal is to raise these dismal statistics for retention and graduation.

On college campuses, there may be some miscommunications amongst administrators, faculty, academic advisors, or counselors. Additionally, if there is a lack of knowledge for resources, no access to mentoring programs, feelings of isolation, and

stereotyping may create barriers to success for students of color (Byers, 2018). In order to mediate against these barriers, a number of universities have implemented programs in the form of deficit-remediation, meaning that a college creates interventions based on the needs or perceived deficits of the students (Harris, 2018). Colleges may seek to create feelings of belonging, access to high quality mentors, provide study related opportunities, and require remedial coursework. An alternative approach is a strength-based model that views all students as capable of success through the realization and application of their individual strengths. Less frequently discussed are barriers to retention and graduation rates of students of color, especially African American male students in programming at the institutional level (Hussein, 2017). Hussein (2017) discussed potential programs that can be developed to mediate against these opportunity gaps from the deficit-approach model. Additionally, policy development and practice, from the strengths-based model, with an emphasis on improving programming that may currently hinder African American male students (Hussein, 2017).

Across the nation, university professors are predominately White, which leads to the maintenance of the status quo, lack of variance in the curriculum, and little high-quality mentorship for African American students from faculty who look like them (Harris, 2018). In Fall 2017, of the 1.5 million faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, 53% were full time and 47% were part time. Faculty include professors, associate professors, assistant professors, instructors, lecturers, assisting professors, adjunct professors, and interim professors. According to the NCES (2017), of all full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, 41% were White males; 35%

were White females; 6% were Asian/Pacific Islander males; 5% were Asian/Pacific Islander females; and 3% each were Black males, Black females, Hispanic males and Hispanic females. Those who were American Indian/Alaska Native and those who were of two or more races each made up 1% or less of full-time faculty (Harris, 2018). Having a predominantly White faculty limits perspectives and cultural awareness, potentially creating a disconnect for students of color and increasing instances of implicit racism.

Students of color are often exposed to instances of microaggressions from their White professors, where an implicit belief may persist that they are intellectually inferior to Whites (Simmons, 2019). Physical, emotional, and mental health issues may be related to microaggressions experienced on college campuses, which can derail a student's goal of graduating from a 4-year institution, particularly on predominantly White campuses (Moragne-Patterson & Barnett, 2017). Students of color, especially African American males, are hurt most by racist interactions with faculty and staff at their university, where a higher standard of acceptance is expected (Grant, 2019). Professors and staff, regardless of race, are expected by African American students to be more culturally aware and accepting of diversity (Pabon, 2016). The lack of diversity awareness amongst institutional leaders and professors can affect students' success (Sparks, 2019). Often, when African American male students feel a lack of belonging, there is a sense of disengagement and lack of interest, which can be detrimental to their overall success.

In this study, I extended the work of previous scholars who have generally found the experiences of Black students at PWIs to be categorically more academically and socially challenging than those of White students (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000;

Cuyjet, 1997; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Kuh & Love, 2000; Von Robertson, Mitra, & Van Delinder, 2005; Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Schwitzer, A. M., Griffin, O. T., Ancis, J. R., Thomas, C. R., 1999; Sedlacek, 1999; Solorzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T., 2000). In this section, relevant empirical literature is highlighted, with an emphasis on key literature related to the stigmatization of African American men, racism in the classroom, money, racism in the larger community, and the value of extracurricular activities.

Several scholars have examined low rates of African American male collegiate success (Adams-King, 2016; Gross, 2017; Hall, 2017; Harper & Wood, 2015; Ransaw & Majors, 2016; Sparks, 2019) and a variety of explanations have been proffered to delineate their reduced intellectual status at PWIs. Such explanations include, but are not limited to, a lack of financial resources, inadequate socialization, lack of substantial participation in campus activities, and academic under-preparedness for college (Brooms, 2018, Farmer & Hope, 2015; Gasman, Nguyen, & Commodore, 2017). The aforementioned reasons emphasize the importance of examining the matriculation of African American male students at PWIs. Harper and Wood (2015) explained how success during preschool and on-going support in their Grades K-12 education is directly correlated to the success of African American males through their Ph.D. The notion that someone cares and supports the goals and aspirations of this population is imperative to the success of African American male students (Small, 2017). It may not be important for some, but simple encouraging gestures makes a major difference for African American male students.

Constant support and affirmation are keys for academic success for African American male students (Holloway, 2018). Consequently, the lack of positive affirmation from teachers can contribute to what Buckley (2019) characterizes as “failure syndrome.” Failure syndrome suggests that when African American students, particularly males, are viewed in stereotypical ways (i.e. black males are stupid, academically incapable, and thugs) in educational settings, there is a possibility they will internalize those negative caricatures and underperform academically. The low expectations for African American male college students may partly explain why these men have the lowest success rate of any collegiate demographic (Flowers, 2006; Harper, 2009; Hoston et al., 2010). Harper & Wood (2015) contends that African American males at PWIs, which are extensions of the larger society, constantly endure a process of dehumanization. This entails a perpetual and less than edifying reinforcement of racist stereotypes that stigmatize them as dumb jocks, African American male criminals (Robertson & Chaney, 2015). Although African American males have attended PWIs in hopes of acquiring a quality education, there are times when the institution makes them feel as though they are not worthy to be there.

Beyond the challenges, a number of African American male students continue to persevere and pursue their educational goals, including college degree attainment. A part of these students’ college experiences includes their identity development, which helps inform their academic efforts and social relationships (Bridges, 2011; Dancy, 2012). A number of research studies have strongly suggested that African American males be encouraged to self-author and rewrite their own narratives (Amechi, 2016; Brooms, 2018a; Clark & Brooms, 2018; Goings, 2016), thus highlighting how African American

males negotiate and navigate college in ways that speak to their agency and autonomy. Additionally, research contends that African American male students' academic engagement increases their opportunities for success and helps counter various deficit perspectives held against them (Douglas, 2017).

Additionally, a critical area of investigation for African American males' college experiences centers on their involvement in clubs and organizations. Most recently, Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs have been developed as a measure both to address some of the challenges which they face and provide them with a support network on campus (Brooms, 2017; Cuyjet, 2006a; Palmer & Maramba, 2011; 2014; Wood & Palmer, 2015). While these studies have been informative in explaining how students' on-campus involvement have helped them better navigate and negotiate campus, little work has focused on them beyond campus interactions and how those contributed to their engagement experiences and social relationships.

The findings from this research study were directly aligned to the guiding questions and assisted in shaping the position paper to address the problem. My review of literature in the study strongly suggests that success, for many African American males, hinges on an array of critical factors, such as peer group influence, family influence and support, faculty relationships, identity development and self-perception, and institutional environment (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Brooms, 2016ab, 2017; Brooms, Goodman, & Clark, 2015; Palmer, Davis, and Maramba, 2010).

The future for research and scholarship on academically gifted and high-achieving African American males in higher education presents myriad challenges and

opportunities to design innovative approaches that are impactful and sustainable across the African American male diaspora. All too often, initiatives and programs that are conceived and operationalized in urban settings fall short of providing viable models and frameworks for those who are ensconced within more bucolic environments. Seemingly, what is an authentic display of high achievement for the African American male who is kinesthetically gifted is different from the African American male who manifests his abilities through his leadership acumen (Bonner, 2015). The characteristics of male learning styles tend to be more kinesthetic, especially for African American males (Ransaw & Majors, 2016). African American males are often stereotyped by their athletic ability, although their intellectual capacity is often overlooked. Therefore, it is imperative to close the achievement gap for African American males in higher education.

A potential point of departure when attempting to answer the research question is to problematize and deconstruct what African American males' high achievement means in different contexts. Defining context as people, place, and situation, it is important to focus on what it means to be a gifted, African American male at a PWI or HBCU in academics and student affairs. According to Davis, Brunn-Bevel, Olive, and Jones (2016), "...privilege and subordination transcend context to a certain degree and that subordinated identities are more a salient across situations" (p. 52). Also, the future of research and scholarship with this high-achieving population must forego new conceptual and theoretical approaches like intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Nelson, Stahl, & Wallace, 2015) and the Multiple Dimensions of Identity model (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) that allow these men to bring all aspects of their being at the table. Hence, it is

necessary to look at who these individuals are at the intersection of their multiple and competing identities.

In addition, future research must tackle the stubbornly persistent problem of how masculinity is defined and framed, particularly as it pertains to successful African American men. It is imperative that successful African American males do not divorce themselves from the contemporary strivings among African Americans who are forging areas in which high achievement is flourishing, especially with leadership potential (Bonner, Jennings, Marbley, & Brown, 2008; Ross 1994; Sternberg, 2005). Successful African American men must have a sense of responsibility to help shape the lives of others. This population definitely needs the support of successful males that not only look like them but share the same experiences and goals in life.

Project Description

The position paper will serve as a tool for distribution to higher education leaders and administrators. The results from this study led to recommendations that provide insight on how to increase retention and graduation rates for African American male students. There is a great need for commitment at both institutions to positively impact retention and graduation rates of African American males.

Specific resources, such as the faculty/staff focus groups, should be directly engaged with the minority males. Furthermore, there is a need to hire additional African American male faculty members who can relate to these male students and serve as mentors. The institutional investment of additional faculty and staff supports the efforts toward an African American male initiative program which serves to develop and support

all African American males on the campus (Brooms, 2018). This program will assist the academic, spiritual, emotional, and financial barriers that most African American males experience during their first year of college. In fact, African American males enrolled in bachelor's degree programs at 4-year institutions graduate at the lowest rates of all other racial and ethnic groups, according to data from the (NCES, 2018). With the investment of additional faculty/staff, programs, and resources, the following strategies are important to consider in order to increase African American males' engagement, persistence, retention and graduation rates:

- Academic enrichment and mentoring to enhance the broad range of academic skills necessary to be successful in college; skill development such as customized sessions on time management, textbook comprehension, note taking studying, and test taking; mentoring that includes both peer-to-peer and adult-to-peer relationships that ensure support and provide advice and guidance
- Leadership training, with opportunities for students to learn as well as community leadership projects
- Activities that promote dignity, respect, love, and trust, such as talking circles, expression through art and culture, community projects, exercise, nutrition classes, and opportunities for male bonding in a familiar, safe place
- Special events or workshops featuring guest speakers, special presentations, conferences, and meetings on topics related to identity and student success, as well as prominent African American in a community forum to improve social

and cultural awareness

- An automated contact system (i.e., email, Twitter, Facebook, or other social media outlets) to reach students and let them know the institution is monitoring their progress
- Civil engagement, such as volunteerism that includes character building and paying it forward
- Public speaking opportunities and interpersonal communication seminars to build communication skills

The goals of this position paper are aligned with the strategic plan of both institutions. University 1's master plan denotes a 25% increase in enrollment, one of the key indicators of improved retention rates for African American males. University 2's strategic priority objectives for the next few years consist of (a) increased enrollment to 10,000 students and a mix of 75% undergraduates and 25% graduate students; (b) increased demographic diversity of the student body; (c) increased percentage of students from underrepresented groups by 3% (www.exacturlpage.org). These objectives support the goals of the research and project study. According to Brooms (2019), postsecondary educators, leaders, and policymakers must do more of what works to enroll, retain, educate, and graduate African American male students. Unfortunately, they cannot do so without a better understanding of what helps these men persist through degree attainment.

However, since embarking on this study, many of the administrators I spoke with are no longer with these institutions. Thus, it will now be my responsibility to convince the new administrators of the importance of this study. Therefore, prior to circulation of

this position paper, I will initiate individual meetings with the current Vice Present for Academic Affairs, Vice President for Student Affairs, Director of Admissions, Director of TRIO programs at both institutions. These meetings will serve to inform each individual listed above and garner their support for the project before distributing it to the campus community.

The second barrier may be a resistance to change and a lack of commitment from the institutional leaders, as it relates to African American males. Consequently, to counteract this resistance to change, I recommend the adoption of a change management model such as the Kotter's 8 step model. According to Kotter International (2016), change within an organization will fail unless the organization take a holistic approach and engages its workforce. This application will require a commitment from the institutions and the development of committees that is designed to focus on African American male students and implement the recommendations from this study.

As a scholar-practitioner, my role as the researcher is to present the results of this research study to the administrations at both institutions. In doing so, I must advocate for change through the recommended solutions in the position paper. Additionally, my passion for this population is deep and unwavering, so considerable time will be devoted to informing internal stakeholders, faculty and staff, and key student affairs professionals to garner their support. Future research may be necessary, as the sample size of this study was small. Therefore, the Office of Institutional Research may be required to spearhead that initiative.

Project Evaluation Plan

The goals of the project are to: (a) provide insight and understanding of the PWI and HBCU experiences from the perspective of the African American male students; (b) further explore the experiences of African American males at University 1 and University 2 within the context of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) key ingredients of the institution; and (c) recommend strategies to influence the retention and graduation rates. These goals are aligned with the institution's strategic goal to promote student success and improved retention rates as one of the key indicators. In essence, the evaluation of this position paper will be formative and summative.

Due to the position paper being a specific written document for an identified audience, evaluating its effectiveness would be dependent upon the target group of readers. Therefore, feedback garnered from the administrators will determine if an understanding of the perceptions based upon the participants experiences was accomplished. It would be beneficial for the administrators to provide feedback on the recommendations that were made, thus opening a dialogue for instituting these recommendations. The formative assessment of the effectiveness of the project will come through the comments, statements, and questions. In the long term, the summative assessment of the effectiveness of the project will be ascertained through the implementation of recommendations by the institution's administration, and ultimately by a devoted commitment to track retention and graduation rates over time, for this specific group of students.

Project Implications

Local Community

The position paper recommends strategies to improve the African American male retention and graduation rates. Based upon the findings of this study, it appears the position paper would be most effective for institutional leaders that work directly with the African American male population on campus. It will also be imperative to continue to hear directly from the participants. It is likely that some of the African American male students' issues could be resolved if both institution's faculty and essential personnel provided a platform with which these students can share their concerns. Based upon the comments shared in the focus groups, many of the African American male students would express their concerns and recommendations to institutional leaders if given the opportunity.

Each focus group revealed reasons why they chose to attend their respective institution. However, once they arrived on campus, the experiences they encountered impacted their view of the institution. In particular, the participants who attended University 2 expressed concerns for role models, mentors, and signature programs. The participants, who attend University 1 expressed serious concerns for support, more African American faculty and staff, and a more welcoming, culturally relevant campus community. Hopefully, addressing the observations of the focus groups at both locations will positively impact the persistence and degree completion of African American males.

Broader Implications

The project recommends strategies to improve retention and graduation rates as

well as ways to positively impact African American male students' campus experience. A better understanding of how impactful the HBCU experience affects retention would enhance the institution's ability to retain more African American males each year. Consequently, an improvement of retention rates would also reflect an improvement of graduation rates. There is a greater opportunity for all historically Black colleges and universities to impact the overall experience for African American males. HBCUs will continue to educate these young men and help them to become productive citizens and social change agents.

The project also recommends strategies for the predominantly White institutions in its efforts to retain and graduate African American male students. Right now, more than at any other time in America's history, teachers of different racial and cultural backgrounds are educating our African American males (Ottley & Ellis, 2019). Strayhorn (2017) concluded in his research that teachers have lower expectations for the academic achievement of African American males. Ironically, based upon comments from participants at University 1, there may be some truth to that. However, most of the participants from University 1 expressed perceptions of having to work harder than their classmates. Low expectations of African American male students seemed to be a consensus thought amongst the group. In life, there are going to be situations and opportunities in which one may have to sacrifice more or work harder, but in the grand scheme of things, this will only make one a stronger and a more complete individual.

Summary

Section 3 described the proposed project for the qualitative study. The project was

developed from findings in Section 2. The project goals were stated and derived from the guiding questions and data gathered from the focus groups. Section 2 provided a rationale of why the project was chosen and how the project answers the guiding questions. The literature review provides a conceptual foundational theory, supports the goals and content of the recommendations, including a relevant curriculum plan, student leadership initiatives specifically for African American male students and professional development. Professional educators, including student support staff of the two institutions, could use the subject of the recommendations as platforms or vehicles for professional development.

Section 3 also explained why a position paper was the preferred project for this study. A description of this project and a list of resources and potential barriers and solutions are also found in section 3. Additionally, Section 3 highlights various components of the project and recommendations for both institutions. Finally, the implications of the project are expected to create social change both locally and in a more far-reaching manner. African American males increased retention and graduation rates on the local campuses means success for their institutions. Consequently, if these local institutions share their practices with other institutions, then retention and graduation success for all African American male students would impact the social climate of the world. Ideally, the success of many students involves having supportive parents who has education as an essential component to life's success. This is certainly not the case for all students. African American male students are essential for this situation. However, if you place African American male students in an academic environment on a college campus

with dedicated faculty and supportive administration with high expectations, the retention and graduation results will be much greater (Landis, 2019).

In Section 3 of this research study, I provided the background of the existing problem, summary of findings, and a description of the goals and rationale for using the position paper as the project genre. Additionally, a review of the literature was completed and a thorough description of resources, potential barriers and solutions, roles and responsibilities, and a timetable for the implementation. I concluded the sections with a synopsis of implications for social change should the recommendations in the position paper be implemented at the institution. In Section 4, I present my reflections recommendations for alternative approaches, project development, importance of this work, implications, applications, and options for future research.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

The problem at the local study site was that African American males from two public 4-year institutions were not graduating from college, as compared to all other ethnic groups and genders. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify college experiences that had a positive impact on retention and success during college, as perceived by African American males. As an African American male, I was motivated to conduct this research. I have had the opportunity to work with African American males for majority of my professional career. During those experiences, it was apparent that these African American males had the aptitude to be successful academically, but many of them lacked the resources and support. I have worked at a private and public HBCU as well as a PWI, and just a couple of years ago, I worked directly with low-income, first generation African American male students through a TRIO program (Upward Bound) for 6 years. Currently, I work with HBCUs and MSIs managing internship programs and training workshops for students, faculty, government officials, and contractors. With my previous work experience, I was in a position to align career goals with research that would impact this particular population of students. The research questions that guided the study were as follows:

- RQ1. What campus experiences are perceived by African American male students to have had the most impact on their retention and success?

RQ2. What are the differences in the campus experiences at HBCUs versus PWIs that emerge from the perceptions of African American males at the different institutional types?

The goal of my research was to inform relevant student support professionals and administrators of the students' perspectives, as I examined ways to eradicate the issues of low retention and graduation.

The deliverable designed from this research study was a position paper. The position paper itself is an asset, as it is a compilation of the research findings presented in an easy-to-read document. The position paper served as a possible focus for TRIO and student affairs professionals as the problems of low retention and graduation rates among African American males are examined at their institutions. An additional strength of this project was the position paper's recommendations on strategies designed to meet the strategic goals of the institution. Another strength is the institutions' commitment to change the dynamics of the dismal retention and graduation rates of African American male students. The findings presented in the position paper positively contribute to the support practices designed for African American males on these two campuses. It is further hoped that the information shared will contribute to the overall understanding of how to successfully retain and graduate African American male students.

In this qualitative research study, I used purposeful sampling to select participants from two public 4-year institutions in a southern state. A limitation of the study is the relatively small sample size in relation to the enrollment of the institutions. As the experiences of the participants in this study are meant to reflect local observations, the

experiences of others may vary across the region and the United States; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other institutions. It is hoped, however, that the research provides a detailed and highly contextualized body of information, which could inform policies and generate new supportive programs.

The source of the data was another limitation for the study. The study was only open to African American male students in good standing; therefore, many of the findings would not be applicable to other ethnic groups. Each participant reflected a different major and came from different parts of the region and nation, which may reflect differing secondary academic preparation. In addition, the findings of this study should not be generalized to all African American males attending college as each student's experience may be different. However, the findings can provide additional insight, generally. Finally, I did not focus on those elements that seem to differentiate PWIs from HBCUs such as facilities, residential life, and cost of attendance and other campus-specific characteristics, which in turn, limited the scope and applicability. Further research can alleviate these limitations, as more participants may be included to improve the generalizability of the study.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

In educational research, there are several approaches in which one can present data. According to Creswell (2012), there are a variety of ways for disseminating research, including oral presentations, journal articles, and conference presentations, which may be applicable to the educational setting. The position paper includes a brief summary of research, methodology, findings, and recommendations from the study. This

project will be presented to student affairs and TRIO professionals on both campuses.

This document will, hopefully, prove to be an effective way to garner thoughts and ideas, discuss some best practices, and generate important and relevant consideration based upon the findings.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

When I embarked on this doctoral journey, the consideration of recommendations that would impact retention and graduation was important to me. A great deal of research data indicated a variety of situations and practices as helpful ways to retaining and graduating African American male students. However, I wanted to find more pertinent information to share with higher education leaders, TRIO, and student affairs professionals that would provide a solid foundation for improving retention and graduation rates for African American male students. This is my passion and an important educational goal to impact as many students as possible in their quest for degree attainment, especially this population.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

I started this doctoral journey with the goal of identifying successful ways to positively impact retention and graduation rates of African American males in higher education. The experience I have gained working at a small predominantly White community college, a small private historically Black college, and a midsize public historically Black university influenced my decision. I have spent the last 8 years reexamining all of my previous educational experiences, delving into an analysis of myself as a scholar, practitioner, project developer, and social change agent.

I have grown academically since starting this program. I have challenged myself as a scholar, writer, critical thinker, and organizer through the readings, critiques and comments, many rewrites, and deadline obligations. Additionally, I have gained much respect for the doctoral journey and the amount of hard work, patience, and flexibility one must endure to be successful. Additionally, I learned to balance my life, family, career, business, and coaching basketball in efforts of completing this degree.

The work in my career and this doctoral journey is a mirror image of my purpose and determination in life. Nonetheless, as the topic was defined and the research began, there was limited data on the topic from a qualitative perspective. Thus, I hope that this body of work will assist in filling the gap of qualitative research and practice on retention and graduation based upon the perspectives of African American male students at these two institutions. Additionally, this research was not only conducted at an HBCU but respectfully at a PWI as well. Hopefully, the data collected and the findings can assist institutions in the future with their efforts of retaining and graduating African American male students.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The recommendations are based upon the implications of the study. These recommendations offer insight on what is needed to increase the retention and graduation rates of African American males. Hopefully, administrators at all levels will consider these recommendations as they work to shape future programs for all students, but specifically for African American male students.

Faculty/Student Connections

Faculty and staff need to develop stronger relationships with African American male students beyond their contractual agreement with the institution. They need to make it a priority to outreach and inquire about day-to-day experiences of the African American males on campus. As research has shown, African American males need continuous support in order to be successful. Most students, regardless of race, tend to connect with faculty who are caring and concerned about their overall well-being, especially African American male students. The participants often made comments about a particular faculty or staff member in which one was connected and trusted. Connecting African American male students to dedicated, concerned, and nurturing faculty and staff is crucial to their retention and success.

African American Faculty and Administrators

The presence of African American faculty members at PWIs is traditionally low. However, even HBCUs have diversified their faculty tremendously. According to NCES (2017), there are 1.5 million faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions. Of all full-time faculty at these institutions, 41% are White males; 35% are White females; 6% are Asian/Pacific Islander males; 5% are Asian/Pacific Islander females; and 3% each are Black males, Black females, Hispanic males, and Hispanic females. However, of the 1.5 million faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, only 45,000 are African American males (NCES, 2018). If the retention and graduation of African American males are important to an institution, the recruitment of African American male faculty members should equally be of importance. African American males need models of

successful people who look like them as motivation to persist. When African American male students connect with African American faculty and staff who understand them, there is a greater change of their overall success. Institutions need to take a serious look at the data on the faculty population in comparison to the ethnic backgrounds of their student population.

Study the Realities of African American Male Students with No Family or Community Support

Similar to participants in Harper (2003, 2012), Griffin (2006), and Palmer et al.'s (2011) research studies, family support was the most significant source of motivation. Many of the research participants shared the importance of their family in terms of acquiring their degree. Some of the participants' parents had never gone to college, and some mentioned that the goal of attending college had been instilled in them since childhood. Even though some of the participants' parents had never attended college, the participants expressed how their parents were hard workers and motivated them to pursue a college degree. However, for many African American males, the reality is that there is a lack of support in the household as well as the community. The importance of understanding these circumstances is imperative to the overall phenomenon of retention and graduation rates of African American males.

Review the Matriculation Model in Which Student Affairs and Academic Affairs Operate Regarding Learning and Development

The research participants explained many classroom situations in which the professors seemed unconcerned with students grasping the content of information in

which was being taught. Research participants in (Loes, Culver, & Trolan, 2018) study disclosed that they learned best when faculty used a variety of techniques such as collaborative learning, connecting lessons to real-world practice, and actively engaging their students in the classroom were most beneficial to their success. This research project challenges institutions to examine how faculty, staff, and administrators work together to maximize student learning. Hopefully, institutions have a matriculation model in which both academic and student affairs have examined for the best interest of the students. There is a need and benefit for a collaborative approach with a shared philosophy in student learning and achievement in order to impact positive change for African American males.

The participants in this study valued their experiences on campus especially when they were able to utilize those experiences back in the classroom, coupled with projects, and involvement on campus. According to Glowatz (2018), a synergy of learning increases satisfaction, achievement, and retention rates. Colleges and universities need to analyze all current resources they provide that specifically benefits African American male students, which have a direct correlation to retention and graduation rates. Unlike the participants in Harper's (2012) research, these participants have major concerns with the financial burden of a college education. Examining the current landscape of the institutions helped to identify current strengths and weaknesses of services and the potential gaps in serving African American male students.

Future research on this topic is significant to increasing the overall knowledge of reasons for such dismal retention and graduation rates. Research data from a much larger

group could be achieved using a quantitative survey format. Additionally, even though focus group sessions were utilized, the use of individual interview sessions may enhance the depth of information gathered as many participants may possibly share more in a one-on-one interview session. It would also be interesting to perform a study with African American males who have graduated successfully.

Conclusion

This doctoral experience culminated in the research motivated by personal career goals and experiences. The overall goal of the research was to identify college experiences that impacted retention and graduation rates based upon the perceptions of African American male students at two public 4-year institutions in a southern state. The project created from data collected was a position paper intended to provide insight to institutional leaders, TRIO and student affairs professionals on retaining and graduating African American male students. This position paper not only provided insight, but it gave the target audience an opportunity to share ideas, recommendations, and discuss alternative measures to improve. Despite the small number of research participants, the data collected was valuable in the aspect of taking a definitive look at the results and starting the conversation with institutional leaders, TRIO and student affairs professionals. As reference in section 4, there are limitations outlined but the implications for social change are apparent. This study will assist these institutions in their quest of retaining and graduating African American males. As higher educational professionals, it is our goal to see all students succeed. Personally, I believe sharing ideas, recommendations, and best practices benefits all parties. I am excited about the

opportunities to be a constituent of social change regarding this particular population.

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Appendix A: The Project

**African American Males Perceptions
on Increasing Retention and
Graduation Rates**

A Position Paper

over the United States for decades. Although enrollment of African American males has increased tremendously over the past twenty years, the retention and graduation rates have remained the lowest of both gender and all ethnic groups. The purpose of this study was to identify the students' perceptions of their college experiences and its influence on retention and graduation. The purpose of this position paper was to make recommendations for retention initiatives specifically for African American males based on the study results.

Edwan L. O'Neal

ABSTRACT

The issue of retention and graduation rates of African American male students has been problematic for institutions all

Executive Summary

African American males troubled status in higher education has garnered tremendous attention over the past few

decades. As researchers make the complexities of the problem increasingly clear, educators, administrators, and policymakers alike have grappled with the question of what can be done to improve African American males' student success. Understanding what contributes to a college experience that motivates students to achieve academic and personal goals is important. Although some colleges and universities have enacted programs to address the needs of these male students, administrators and faculty have to respond to their unique needs to make a difference in their lives, retain them in school and earn a degree. Once university leaders understand the unique needs of African American male students and how to address them, the retention and graduation rates will increase.

This study was completed using a qualitative research approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with thirty full-time African American male students who were in good standing at their respective institution.

The guiding research questions were:

- 1) What college experiences are perceived by African American male students to have the most impact on their retention and success?
- 2) Are there any differences in the college experiences provided at Historically Black Colleges and Universities versus Predominantly White Institutions that emerge from the perceptions of African American males at the different institutional types?

The results of the focus group sessions were reviewed considering the literature and theory, culminating in

recommendations to improve retention and graduation rates. The goals of this position paper are to:

- (a) Provide insight and understanding of African American males' perspective from their on-campus experiences and its subsequent effect on their retention and graduation;
- (b) Further explore the experiences of African American males at both institutions within the context of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) key ingredients of the institution;
- (c) Recommend strategies to influence retention and graduation rates.

Background

According to Hamilton (2018), "a third more African American men are incarcerated than in higher education". For nearly two decades, the statement, "More Black males are incarcerated than in college" has been popular with those attempting to dramatize the plight of

African American males (Harper, 2012).

Today, the characterization of more African American males in prison than in college is certainly not accurate, however, most researchers would agree that there are far too many African American males in prison and not enough in college. Understanding the college experiences that motivate students to achieve academic and personal goals are important, especially for African American males whose college retention and completion rates are lower than any other ethnic group according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, (2018).

As the racial demography of the U.S. changes, researchers have been more intentional about exploring the experiences, challenges, and success factors for groups of color underrepresented in higher education (Harper, 2016). The enrollment crisis is

just one of a litany of higher education issues for the African American male student. As stated by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2018), retention and graduation rates of African American male students are well below those of all ethnic groups and gender, therefore; the combination of the retention and graduation rates indicates a crisis in higher education as well as African American communities.

Retention and graduation rates have long been a focus of institutional strategies, especially amongst African American male students. Retention rates measure the percentage of first-time, full-time undergraduate students who return to the same institutions the following fall, and graduation rates measure the percentage of first-time, full-time undergraduate students who complete their program at the same institution within a specified period of time.

Purpose

The primary focus of this study was to examine college experiences that impact retention and graduation rates based upon the perspectives of African American males at two public 4-year institutions. One institution was predominantly white (PWI) and the other institution was considered an historically black college and university (HBCU). The study was completed using a qualitative research design, using focus groups on both campuses. During the focus group sessions, participants were asked seven open-ended questions to lead the discussion. The following open-ended questions guided the discussion:

1. What are the motivations and characteristics you possess that have contributed to your persistence to graduate from college...in essence, what experiences have contributed to

- your overall success in college thus far?
2. What barriers to academic success did you have to overcome and how did you prevail?
 3. Tell me about a specific time when things were challenging for you in your degree program. What happened? Who was involved?
 4. Tell me about a specific time when things were going well for you during your degree program. What happened? Who was involved?
 5. In your opinion, how can this institution do a better job in producing more successful African American male college graduates?
 6. What would your family members say has made you successful since you entered college?
 7. What external/off-campus experiences do you feel have contributed to your journey to graduate from college?

Although these results and recommendations are specific to these two institutions, the results may provide insight to institutions across American as they attempt to tackle the attrition tide and improve the retention and graduation rates of African American males on their campuses.

The Local Problem

The problem addressed is that of retention and graduation rates of African American males in two different institutional types in a southern state; one institution is predominantly white (PWI) and the other institution is a historically Black college and university (HBCU).

The participants' perception of their experiences that assisted their persistence toward graduation and influence on their retention is presented. This format for presentation of the study results is an appropriate format for consumption by the two relevant

institutional administrations since it allows the results to be shared in a confidential manner. The Executive Summary also allows for the illustration of the research data in an abbreviated and easy-to-read format with a focus on the recommendations emerging from the study. Creswell (2012), suggests that an executive summary will emphasize findings and implications for practice to an identified audience with particular interest in the outcomes of the study.

Research Design and Approach

The objective of this qualitative research study was to explore the students' perception on increasing retention and graduation rates. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenology has been considered an "educational qualitative research design," whose roots stem from the discipline of Philosophy (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 101). The phenomenology qualitative research method was best for

this study because it is used to describe how human beings experience a certain phenomenon. A phenomenological study attempts to set aside biases and preconceived assumptions about human experiences, feelings, and responses to a particular situation (Van Manen, 2017). Phenomenology mainly aims at understanding the underlying meaning of participants lived or common experiences (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). In learning, human action is focused finding new meanings and explanations for things.

Phenomenology does not put forward anything before and during the research process. It does not give explanations and logical inferences for situations. Phenomenology is only interested in an existent situation that is imaginative or a real-life experience. It focuses on only the descriptions of an individual's perceptions. Phenomenology describes

the way in which humans make sense of their everyday life/world from their own perspective (Dall’Alba, 2010).

Seeber (2020) explained quantitative research study was considered more appropriate based on the research questions the study seeks to answer.

Research Questions

The guiding research questions sought to identify college experiences, which impacted retention and graduation success.

The guiding research questions were:

RQ 1: What campus experiences are perceived by African American male students to have had the most impact on their retention and success?

RQ 2: What are the differences in the campus experiences at HBCUs versus PWIs that emerge from the perceptions of African American males at the different institutional types?

Defining persistence as perceived by the participants to understand their perceptions of successful educational experiences is important. Additionally, identifying common practices that would be considered relevant to a successful educational experience for all African American males. Merriam (1998) asserted; phenomenological studies focus on the overall essence of an experience. Therefore, usage of a phenomenological study for this research allows insights that would enrich African American males’ college enrollment and inspire similar studies to be conducted using similar methods based on this current

qualitative research design.

Specifically, what African American male students felt impacted their retention to matriculate through graduation.

Purposeful sampling generated a total of 30 full-time African American male participants from both public institutions. The participants from the predominantly White institution consisted of 16 students: three sophomores, five juniors, five seniors, and three graduate students. The participants from the historically Black college and university consisted of 14 students: three sophomores, four juniors, four seniors, and three graduate students.

All participants signed an informed consent form which described the purpose of the study, the consent of audio-recording, how the information would be used, voluntary participation, and the risks and benefits of the study.

Member checking and an external auditor were used to validate the information and determine researcher bias in the analysis.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured focus group interviews.

According to Guest, et. al (2004), focus groups originated in market research during the 1950s when people were brought together to view their attitudes toward new products. Today, focus groups are still used for this purpose, but their popularity has spread to wider aspects of research including higher education.

According to Morgan (2018), focus group interviews allow the researcher to probe more deeply than with other forms of interviews. The researcher can interact with the participants, pose follow-up questions, and can effectively engage with the participants (Guest,

Namey, Taylor, Eley, & McKenna, 2017). Focus group interviews also allow the researcher to obtain contextual information from non-verbal responses, such as facial expressions or body language (Morgan, 2018). Merriam & Tisdell (2015) purported that focus interviews as a method of gaining information on past events that cannot be replicated, and knowledge on a person's feelings, behaviors and interpretation of events. Although focus group interview sessions are considered more time-consuming and sometimes costly, it is presumed to have a better response rate (McMillan, 2012).

The focus group sessions were informative and productive. The comfortable feeling during the focus group interviews allowed the participants to freely respond to questions. Prior to beginning each session, the participants completed the

Participant Information for Project Study (see Appendix D), reviewed and signed the informed consent, was apprised of and assented to focus group being audio recorded.

The value of the audio recordings was expressed to the participants because it allows for more accurate recording of statements. The audio recordings of the focus group also allowed me to focus on the flow of the conversations amongst the group, rather than recording what each participant was stating. The focus group sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes each and were conducted on the participants' campus in a lecture room at a mutually convenient time for the participants. The participants at both institutions answered and discussed semi-structured, open-ended questions (see Appendix C). During the focus group session, it was imperative for me to be mindful of time, so all participants

had an equal opportunity to engage in the conversation.

I wanted to ensure a very friendly, welcoming, and relaxed atmosphere that warranted open, honest discussion amongst the group. Due to the fact, sessions allowed audio recording, I completely eliminated the initial plan of note taking to focus directly on conducting and managing a comfortable, in depth dialogue. Additionally, I provided refreshments for all the participants.

As a former administrator at University 2, I was aware of the nuances of the culture and environment that existed.

However, I am unfamiliar with University 1 and the campus climate. My challenge was to hear the participants' responses and accept their experiences without interpreting them based upon my experiences or lack thereof. I did not allow my experiences

or lack thereof to overshadow the study as it may have influenced the value of the project and the ultimate effect on social change.

Data Analysis

In the process of analysis for this study, I employed Creswell's (2012) recommended six steps which are (a) organization of data, (b) initial exploration through coding, (c) developing description and themes, (d) representation using narratives and visuals, (e) interpretation through personal reflection and literature, and (f) validation and accuracy. Data analysis involves the process of breaking down the information into smaller components to reveal the characteristics, elements, and structure of the content (Elliott, 2018). The first act in the organization of data is transcription. Transcriptions from the interviews were read to gain a familiarity with the information

contained in the documents.

Additionally, Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) were used to easily and efficiently organize, sort, save and track data collected.

The research questions were used to make valid inferences from the participants' responses. Additionally, each participant was provided a *Participant Information for Project Study Form* (see Appendix D) for capturing basic demographical information, which remained confidential as stated in the *Participant Consent Form*. I applied McMillan's (2012) recommended data organization by identifying participant's wording as emic data, and researcher representation of emic data as etic data. The process required constant review of the data to ensure accurate coding into classification, and meaningful

descriptions prior to the final interpretation and analysis of the data. Thus, an inductive synthesis of the research data lead to inferences, supported by visuals drawn from (CAQDAS). The recordings also provided direct quotes and observer's comments to substantiate findings. Finally, I conducted member checks which allowed participants an opportunity to correct any misconceptions of their views, if any. Students were invited to review the analysis via email and provide feedback or corrections pertaining to their personal statements. Additionally, if participants desired, they were provided the opportunity to meet with me to further discuss findings, but no participant chose to do so. The participants from University 2 included 3 sophomores, 4 juniors, 4 seniors, and 3 graduate students. Of the 16 students

from University 1, 3 were sophomores, 5 juniors, 5 seniors, and 3 graduate students. As indicated earlier, pseudonyms are used as names for the participants.

Summary of Findings

Each audio file was transcribed and Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) was used to store, examine, and organize the data collected. Based upon the discussions, the research questions revealed responses that developed into five themes: (a) rationale for choosing their university (b) family, (c) academic culture, (d) student life, and (e) racial consciousness and self-growth.

Rationale for Selecting Their

University

Participants from University 2 (HBCU) chose to attend the HBCU simply because they grew up in inner city neighborhoods. Therefore, leaving their

cities and coming to a place like University 2 was a sense of making it out of the hood, as stated by participant S3 from university 2. Other participants chose to attend university 2 just because it was a family tradition. Several of the participants elaborated on their hometown experiences, many of them brought up the gang violence, drug abuse, and high school dropouts in their communities. Overall, it seemed a primary goal of enrollment at University 2 was the opportunity for self-improvement and a positive alternative to what was available in their home communities.

Somewhat different from HBCU enrollees, many of the participants chose to attend the University 1 (PWI) lived in small towns in rural areas such as the Black Belt, which is a term referring to a region in the United States which rich, black topsoil, stretches through central

Alabama and northeast Mississippi.

Although the goals and aspirations of the participants were similar, it was expressed by SM2U1 the importance to escape the rural areas and have a better life than the one in which his parents live now.

Family

When interview question one was asked to participants within both focus groups, the responses focused on family and future success. The part that parents play in the academic portion of African American males' lives have shown to be impressionable and impactful when measuring their ability to pursue and persevere in higher education (Strayhorn, 2017). Participant G1U2 very confidently affirmed his motivations by stating:

“My motivations for me coming to college and actually being persistence, I'm the oldest of nine kids I'm setting a

standard for my brother's and sister's so for me not to graduate is like setting a standard for them not to graduate at all.

So, when I graduate tomorrow it's a sign for them to be there motivation to do it as well so hopefully there is ripple effect for them to be graduating from college.”

Family was extremely important based upon the responses from the students of both focus groups. The participants from University 2 stressed the importance of their family many times during the discussion of motivations to persist to graduation.

Many participants emphasized enrolling into a college as a way to gain more opportunities for their careers once they graduate based upon the dynamics of their home life circumstances.

Participant J3U1 said, “my motivation to pursue my college degree is my mother, she is a single parent with sickle cell disease, and I want to make her proud.”

Academic Culture

The academic culture on every college campus is different. The codes in this them included academic preparedness, classroom setting, student-faculty relationship, mentors, academic advisors, among others. The second open-ended question during the focus group session allowed participants an opportunity to discuss the academic challenges in which they faced at their respective institution. The students indicated the rigorous curriculum at both institutions but also just not being prepared mentally for the dedication and hard work it takes to be a successful college student. Participant SM2U1 stated:

“I would say my barrier from high school was that grades came easily and then when I came to college, I thought it was going to be the same way and it was completely different. No study habits

whatsoever, then when I received that first “F”, it turned me right around to where I suppose be. I knew coming to college, I had to study and being in high school where I didn’t have to study because it came easy, but college wasn’t so easy.”

The academic culture at University 1 based upon the responses from the participant seemed to be one of high aptitude, challenging coursework, and renowned research and technology programs. The apparent roles of many faculty seemed to support this interpretation of the academic life at University 1 in that faculty tended to be less available to students. It seemed to be assumed that faculty members were more highly involved in individual and departmental research. However, some students were appreciative of help from other sources.

Regardless of the institution, the recruitment of African American faculty members should equally be of importance. African American males need models of successful people who look like them as motivation to persist. When African American male students can connect with African American faculty and staff members who understand them is complementary to their overall success. Institutions need to take a serious look at the data on the faculty population with regard to the ethnic backgrounds of their student population.

Student Life

During discussions for open-ended questions three and four, participants reference the impact of student life on campus. Campus culture and student life are significant factors that affect African American male's achievement and attitudes during their collegiate

experience. According to (Miller, 2019) students who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities and experiences, both inside and outside the classroom are more likely than their disengaged peers to persist through graduation.

The African American male students interviewed in this study generally experienced more adjustment issues on the PWI campus rather than at the HBCU. Simmons (2019) reported African American males' perceptions of and experiences with social receptivity at a PWI can have a significant impact on the students' learning experience.

Research has indicated that when students are enrolled at institutions with supportive environments (Twumasi, 2019), they experience greater satisfaction with college and are more likely to graduate.

Moreover, when African American males have the opportunity to participate in higher education, and when well-conceived and formalized support systems are put into place to promote achievement, they succeed in academic settings (Dancy & Hotchkins, 2015). Nonetheless, the theme of student life includes the social experiences primarily based upon research question number five.

Racial Consciousness & Self Growth

The participants from University 1 made frequent references to their perceived status as an African American male attending a predominantly White institution. Student J2U1 put in this way: “What motivates me is, when you attend a PWI, you have to ‘out-shine’ everyone in your class because you are the only Black guy in most classes”. This perspective was affirmed by other participants from University 1;

participant S1U1 contributed this statement: “many people here already have preconceived notions of African Americans, because they expect for us not to have this opportunity, so just proving them wrong is really my motivation.” Several of the students comments generated considerable agreement from other University 1 participants with verbal and non-verbal indication of agreement.

Regarding inclusion and self-worth, participant S2U1 stated, “my friends who attend HBCUs go to class excited and I am here going to class trying to make sure I don’t get into any trouble or ‘stand out’ more than usual.” As might be expected, students from the HBCU did not raise this point specifically about standing out or having more Black student events, but they did express feelings about how the institution was important to them in their growth and

awareness of being an African American male.

Recommendation #1

Create a minority male initiative program that assesses the persistence of each African American male on a yearly basis. This program monitors the progress and success of the African American males while providing resources to assist them. In addition, the program will encourage campus involvement and identify ways to supplement tuition cost to ensure availability of essential staff support.

Recommendation #2

If hiring additional African American male faculty members is not available immediately, it is recommended to develop a faculty/staff focus group. This group would be dedicated to the African American male student community. They would serve as a sounding board for this particular group on campus.

Recommendation #3

It is recommended that both institutions employ more African American male faculty who can relate to the minority population on campus. The PWI hires less than 10% of African American male faculty members, while the HBCU only employs 22% of African American male faculty. The African American male population needs the additional motivation by individuals who look like them. Additionally, these faculty members can help navigate the students through the process of acquiring their degree simply.

Recommendation #4

It is recommended for both institutions to develop minority male student organizations. Involvement and leadership opportunities within organizations on campus would provide the family values and environment necessary for most African American

male students to feel the support needed to persist.

Recommendation #5

It is recommended that all African American males have an African American male advisor or mentor on campus. The advisor/ mentor will offer academic enrichment and mentoring to enhance the broad range of academic skills necessary for them to be successful in college; skill development such as customized sessions on time management, textbook comprehension, note taking studying, and test taking; mentoring that includes both peer-to-peer and adult-to-peer relationships that ensure support and provide advice and guidance.

Recommendation #6

Both institutions should have a specific location on campus for students to address their issues, concerns, consciousness, and self-growth. This

office or department would provide leadership training, with opportunities for African American male students to learn as well as participate in community leadership projects. Additionally, this office offers activities that promote dignity, respect, love, and trust, such as talking circles, expression through art and culture, community projects, exercise, nutrition classes, and opportunities for male bonding in a familiar, safe place. Special events or workshops featuring guest speakers, special presentations, conferences, and meetings on topics related to identity and student success, as well as prominent African American in a community forum to improve social and cultural awareness.

Project Evaluation Plan

The goals of the project are to: (a) provide insight and understanding of the PWI and HBCU experiences from the

perspective of the African American male students; (b) further explore the experiences of African American males at University 1 and University 2 within the context of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) key ingredients of the institution; and (c) recommend strategies to influence the retention and graduation rates. These goals are aligned with the institution's strategic goal to promote student success and improved retention rates as one of the key indicators. In essence, the evaluation of this position paper will be formative and summative.

Due to the position paper being a specific written document for an identified audience, evaluating its effectiveness would be dependent upon the target group of readers. Therefore, feedback garnered from the administrators will determine if an understanding of the perceptions based upon the participants experiences was

accomplished. It would be beneficial for the administrators to provide feedback on the recommendations that were made, thus opening a dialogue for instituting these recommendations. The formative assessment of the effectiveness of the project over time, for this specific group will come through the comments, statements, and questions. In the long term, the summative assessment of the effectiveness of the project will be ascertained through the implementation of recommendations by the institution's administration, and ultimately by a devoted commitment to track retention and graduation rates of students.

Future Research

Future research on this topic is significant to increasing the overall knowledge of reasons for such dismal retention and graduation rates of African American males. Research data from a much larger group could be achieved

using a quantitative survey format. Additionally, even though focus group sessions were utilized, the use of individual interview sessions may enhance the depth of information gathered as many participants may possibly share more in a one-on-one interview session.

Conclusion

This doctoral experience culminated in research motivated by personal career goals and experiences. The overall goal of the research was to identify college experiences that impacted retention and graduation rates based upon the perceptions of African American male students at two different institutions. Despite the small number of research participants, the data collected was valuable in the aspect of taking a definitive look at the results and starting the conversation with institutional leaders. This study will assist institutions

in their quest of retaining and graduating African American males. I am excited about the opportunities to be a constituent of social change regarding this particular population.

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Appendix B: Research Study Introductory Letter

Greetings Student,

My name is Edwan L. O'Neal, Doctoral student at Walden University, Minneapolis, MN under the supervision of Dr. Barbara Salice, Committee Chair and faculty member Dr. Maureen Ellis in the Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership. I am currently working on a doctoral research study entitled "*African American Males Perceptions on Increasing Retention and Graduation Rates*". This study seeks to understand how the college experiences of African American male students impact their overall success.

I would like to invite you to participate in this very important research study that will allow you an opportunity to express your views and perspectives as an African American male student in higher education. With your participation, educators and higher institutional administrators could use your information to enhance the educational experiences of all African American male students.

The focus group session will be held on your campus in a desired classroom or auditorium. Permission will be obtained from you to audiotape the session for accuracy in obtaining in-depth discussions and to effectively transcribe the conversations. Additional information on this process will be explained at the beginning of the focus group meeting. Please note there will not be any audio recordings without your knowledge or permission. Additionally, data from the focus group will be kept strictly confidential. Participant's names or any identifying information will not be used at any time within the research.

Please be aware that your participation in the study is strictly voluntarily. Participation will not have any impact on your current enrollment or academic standing at your institution. Participants may receive a brief summary of the study results and any transcribed data upon their request. Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

If you are willing to participate by sharing your college experiences, please email at XXX@waldenu.edu or call at XXX. If you have any additional questions or concerns related to this research study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Edwan L. O'Neal

Appendix C: Focus Group Open-Ended Interview Questions

The following open-ended questions guide the research study:

- 1.) What are the motivations and characteristics you possess that have contributed to your persistence to graduate from college...in essence, what experiences have contributed to your overall success in college thus far?
- 2.) What barriers to academic success did you have to overcome and how did you prevail?
- 3.) Tell me about a specific time when things were challenging for you in your degree program. What happened? Who was involved?
- 4.) Tell me about a specific time when things were going well for you during your degree program. What happened? Who was involved?
- 5.) In your opinion, how can this institution do a better job in producing more successful African American male college graduates?
- 6.) What would your family members say has made you successful since you entered college?
- 7.) What external/off-campus experiences do you feel have contributed to your journey to graduate from college?

Appendix D: Participant Information for Project Study

First Name: _____ M.I. ____ Last Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip Code: _____

High School: _____ Graduation Year: _____

Email: _____

Extracurricular Activities / Sports / Clubs / Organizations:

List any colleges / universities which you have attended prior to this institution:

Classification:

Sophomore Junior Senior Graduate/ Alumni

Intended or Completed Major / Degree: _____

Household Composition: Please select the marital status of your parents

Married Never Married Divorced

Separate Widowed

Please select your age:

18 – 19 20 – 21 22 – 23 Over 23

Please tell us why you chose this college / university? _____
