Minnesota State University Moorhead
RED: a Repository of Digital Collections

Dissertations, Theses, and Projects | Graduate Studies

Spring 5-13-2022

Which Factors Influence African American Male students' Persistence in and Graduation from College?

Jeremiah Rotich
jeremiah.rotich@go.mnstate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://red.mnstate.edu/thesis

Part of the Education Commons

Researchers wishing to request an accessible version of this PDF may complete this form.

Recommended Citation

Rotich, Jeremiah, "Which Factors Influence African American Male students' Persistence in and Graduation from College?" (2022). *Dissertations, Theses, and Projects*. 706.
https://red.mnstate.edu/thesis/706

This Dissertation (799 registration) is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at RED: a Repository of Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Projects by an authorized administrator of RED: a Repository of Digital Collections. For more information, please contact RED@mnstate.edu.

Which Factors Influence African American Male Students' Persistence in and Graduation from College?

By

Jeremiah Rotich
Master of Public & Nonprofit Administration, Metropolitan University, Saint Paul MN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Dissertation Committee:

Boyd L. Bradbury, Ph. D., Committee Chair

Julie Swaggert, Ed.D., Committee Member

Denise E. Williams, Ph.D., Committee Member

Angela Bowlus, Ed.D., Committee Member

Minnesota State University Moorhead

Moorhead, MN

May 2022

ABSTRACT

Black male students (also known as African American male students) graduate from college at a lower rate than their Latino, White, and Asian counterparts for various reasons, including a lack of engagement, a lack of personal goals, institutional factors, and dispositions. Other reasons that impede students from achieving their academic goals include limited academic and personal support, a lack of flexible policies, and a lack of diversity engagement. These challenges are faced by both the 2-year colleges and the 4-year institutions. This study employed a narrative inquiry approach in exploring factors that influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college through the stories of six individuals.

keywords: Black male, African American male student, college, persistence, barriers

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Introduction…….....9

Statement of the Problem…….…..11

Significance of Study…….12

Purpose of the Study…….....13

Research Question(s).....13

Organization of Dissertation…….….14

Permission and IRB Approval…….….14

Informed Consent.....14

Limitations…….....15

Conceptual Framework…….….15

Conclusion….....16

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction.....17

Body of Review/Synthesis of Literature. 21

Defining African American Male Student 22

Factors Contributing to Low Retention/Graduation…….....23

Experiences that African American Undergraduate Male Students may have had as they Transition to Campus Life…….....23

Factors/Challenges while in College …….....35

Factors that Support Retention/Graduation.....38

Analysis of Literature and Recommendation.....46

Recommended Course of Research……...…49

Conclusions.....51

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

Introduction.....53

Research Question(s).....53

Research Design....54
Setting of the Study....56
Participants....56
Data Collection and Instrumentation....57
Data Analysis....58
Procedures....58
Researcher's Role....59
Ethical Considerations....59
Limitations....60
Conclusions....60
CHAPTER 4. PRESENTATION OF THE DATA....61
Overview of Analysis....62
Collecting the Data....62
Organization of Data....62
Participants....63
Part I: Participant Narratives of their Educational Journeys....63
Willie....63
Max....66
Joe....68
Fred....72
Rich....76
Leon....83
Part II: Analysis of the Findings....87
Barrier Themes....87
Lack of Support....87

Lack of Cultural Competency....89
Lack of Identity....91
Personal Issues....91
Navigating College....93
Time Poverty....94
Commitments....94
Preparedness....95
Themes of Persistence....96
Support....96
Role Models....100
Achievement....102
Internal Motivation....103
Conclusion....104
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION....106
Discussion....106
Interpretation of Findings....108
Limitations....118
Recommendations....119
Future Research....120
Researcher's Reflection....121
Conclusions....122
REFERENCES....123

APPENDIX A. [CONSENT LETTER] ……...…….…..…130

APPENDIX B. [APPROVALS]……...…132

APPENDIX C. [INTERVIEW PROTOCOL].…….……...…134

APPENDIX D. [THEMES].……135

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With great appreciation, I want to acknowledge and express gratitude to my committee members, Dr. Boyd L. Bradbury, Dr. Julie Swaggert, Dr. Denise E. Williams, and Dr. Angela Bowlus for their time and support throughout the course of this research. Additionally, I would also like to thank my cohort in the Education Leadership Ed.D. Program at Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM) for their tremendous support and for cheering me on throughout this process. I want also to appreciate the MSUM faculty and staff for their great support and making this learning experience positive and achievable. You went above and beyond in your teaching. I would also like to express my gratitude to the participants in my study. I would not have been able to complete this study without their willingness to share their stories with me. I want to give special thanks to my advisor and committee chair Dr. Boyd Bradbury. Dr. Bradbury not only advised me through my MSUM's Educational Leadership Doctoral Program, but also helped me in reviewing my book: "Handbook for Immigrants Coming to America," containing valuable information for people visiting or relocating (migrating) to America. I am truly honored to have been mentored by Dr. Bradbury who went above and beyond in his support as well as sharing his great wisdom by quoting, "eating a piece of the elephant in the room at a time!" Finally, I also want to express my appreciation for my family, especially my wife Bernice, son Kevin and his spouse Grace, daughter Jolene and her spouse David, and my grandchild baby Elora, for all their support on my educational journey. God bless you all mightily.

DEDICATION

I devote this dissertation to the African American male students whom I interacted with as a fellow student as well as those whom I worked with. I also want to dedicate this paper to future degree-seeking African American male students. May these narratives inspire you to keep moving forward. I also want to dedicate this paper to my family, friends, and Metro State/Minneapolis College students and colleagues. You have all been a great support and an inspiration. I am truly grateful.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Black male students do not graduate from college at the same rate as their White, Asian, and Hispanic counterparts. According to *National Center for Education Statistics* [NCES] (2019), only 40% of Blacks graduate from college within six years of starting, as compared with 74% of Asians, 64% of Whites, and 54% of Hispanics. *Black Student College Graduation* (2019) concurred that the graduation rate for Blacks is lower than other racial groups by noting that the graduation rate for college remains at a dismally low 42% nationwide (para 1). The article reported further that Black women outpace Black men in college completions, with 46% of women graduating compared to 35% of men. Although graduation statistics depict part of the graduation disparity picture, a review of literature, such as the one by Hall and Rowan (2000) is necessary to ascertain which issues impede the retention and/or graduation rates of Black males in higher education. For the purposes of this research, the definition of an African American male student includes only Black males born in the US (Ogbu & Simmons, 1998). The terms African American male students and Black male students will be used interchangeably.

A research approach of narrative inquiry was employed in undertaking this research. This qualitative narrative study explored "Which Factors influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college?" through the stories of six individuals. The researcher conducted the interviews between February 2020 and October 2021, and thereafter, carried out data analysis (e.g., thematic analysis through coding of transcribed interviews).

Nelson et al. (2020) in tips to advisors in creating a more welcoming space for Black male students, brought up some of the issues that male students have to deal with while in college; those are, racism, microaggressions, white privilege, and racial fatigue that contribute to the deterioration of mental, physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual health. These issues

make the college experience challenging. Nocella II et al. (2014) expanded the factors or experiences that African American male students go through before joining college. According to Nocella II et al. and corroborated by Heitzeg (2009), some of the challenges encountered by the Black males as they transition to higher institutions of learning include:

- The School to Prison Pipeline – schools have been used to send students to prison, hence derailing their academic journey
- Media Construction of Crime and Criminals – the media have depicted the Black males as criminals
- The Rise of the Prison Industrial Complex – mass incarceration had been tied to profit motive
- Zero Tolerance and Policing in the Hallways – fueled and accelerated the flow of Black males to the legal system
- Racial Disproportionality – selective application of policies based on race, class and gender
- Increased Rates of Suspensions and Expulsions – Black male students face expulsion from school right from the moment they step into preschool

Findings from the personal goals' analysis identified across the 2004 and 2006 data by Wood and Palmer (2013) illustrated that Black males have a strong inclination toward having steady work, being financially well off, being a community leader, having leisure time, and having children. In other words, personal goals can act as motivational factors or drivers for African American male students' overall achievement. Among other factors also found to support the retention and graduation rate of African American male students as reported by the literature are:

- Institutional factors
- Trust
- Academic and personal support
- Diversity involvement
- Flexible policies
- Academic factors
- Retention program

Knowing which factors contribute to African American male student lower graduation rates from college will enable higher education leadership and administrators to take the necessary steps to mitigate and improve the achievement gap of Black students.

Statement of the Problem

The participation of African American male students in colleges across the United States brings a wealth of cultural experiences, values, and strengths to the learning environment. African American male graduates provide much needed diversity in the employment sectors (Keith, Stastny & Brunt, 2016). Furthermore, since "higher education attainment results in economic growth, global competitiveness, decreased crime and poverty, and increased civic engagement," it is important to determine why some minority groups, specifically African American male students, are not earning degrees at a higher rate (Andrade, 2014, p.21).

Black male students throughout the United States have experienced failure in educational systems, and their underrepresentation exists throughout the educational system. Black male students have the lowest persistence as well as graduation attainment among their male peers in higher education. According to Wood and Palmer (2013, p. 223) 42.2% of Black male students graduate from college compared to 53.2% of Latinos, 55.6% of Whites, and 76.7% of Asian

males. For this reason, understanding the challenges that African American male students face while in college should help in changing this trend.

The percentage of African American male students who graduate from college is low. Since college degree completion contributes to more stable careers and jobs and higher income, understanding the statistics and achievement gap is important (Keith, Stastny & Brunt, 2016). This study examined the factors that facilitate graduation/retention as well as the challenges that impede the retention and graduation rate of Black male students. The researcher investigated various factors, such as cognitions and emotions, lack of academic and personal support, diversity involvement, and flexible policies, that influence the retention/graduation rate of Black male students.

Significance of the Study

The rationale/relevance for investigating this problem includes the following: 1) It will advance knowledge in the field of higher education. For example, the research will bring to light the various factors that advance or hinder graduation achievement for black male students; 2) The research should help to understand and potentially mitigate some of the issues that contribute to a lack of persistence and graduation. Those in higher education will use the newfound knowledge to improve the retention and graduation rate of these students. “Black Student College,” (2019, para 1) reported that black male students’ graduation rate remains at a dismally low 42 percent, nationwide. The article reported further that Black women outpace Black men in college completions, with women graduating at 46 percent while the men do at 35 percent; and 3) Answering these questions may improve the human condition of Black male students while in college and thereafter.

Purpose of the Study

In an effort to determine "Which Factors influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college," a closer look at the factors and the barriers to the lack of achievement are examined in this study. Understanding the factors that contribute to Black male students graduating from college will enable higher education leadership and administrators to potentially improve on the retention and graduation rate of Black male students. Identifying the challenges will also greatly help this minority group of students achieve their academic goals. This study, and other similar efforts could help shed light on factors that are impacting Black males negatively, and perhaps the study results and others could help mitigate those factors that contribute in negative ways.

This study created a platform in which lived experiences of successful and unsuccessful Black male students are shared to provide insight and perspective. The end goal is to provide perspective and offer knowledge on how to better serve these underrepresented students at every point in their educational journey. In order to understand this common phenomenon and the real-world experiences through the lens of people, lived experiences was studied as recommended by Broughton-Pretti (2016).

Research Question(s)

The central question that was explored in this research is: **Which Factors influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college?** The essence of this research was to understand and appreciate African American male student's entire educational journey from the time of joining college to the time of graduating from college. To answer the overall research question, secondary questions were explored through interviews and the literature review:

1. What made you graduate or not graduate from college? What experiences did you encounter? What challenges did you face?
2. What did you do to succeed?
3. In your opinion, did the college play any significant role in alleviating any challenges you faced?
4. What role did the instructors play in your success? In areas, you did not do well.
5. How did the community help you succeed in your college life?
6. Explain how you interacted with other students. Did they assist you when you faced challenges?
7. What other support did the college provide or did not provide for your success?
8. What did you know about college success before joining college?
9. How did you handle challenges that came your way?
10. What else can you say that the college could have done to make you succeed?

By addressing and answering these questions, a better insight was acquired on why some African American male students are able to succeed while some do not.

Organization of Dissertation

Permission and IRB Approval. In order to conduct this study, the researcher received MSUM's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to ensure the ethical conduct of research involving human subjects (Fraenkel et al. 2019). Likewise, authorization to conduct this study was obtained from Metropolitan State University where the research took place (See Appendix B and C). However, most of the interviews too place virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Informed Consent. Protection of human subjects participating in the research was assured. Participants were made aware that this study was being conducted as part of the

researcher's Doctoral Degree Program requirements from Minnesota State University Moorhead. Confidentiality was protected through the use of pseudonyms (e.g., Student 1) without the utilization of any identifying information. The choice to participate or withdraw at any time was outlined both verbally and in writing (see Appendix A).

Limitations. Limitations that impacted this study included available time and participant recollection. The collection of narratives through interviews required a significant amount of time on the part of participants. With wanting to collect narrative through interviews, a significant amount of time was required by the participants. It is important to note that this study relied on participants' retrospective memories, which may have involved an altered view of the actual experience. Creswell (2018) noted, due to emotional trauma, distortion of event(s) or memories, or participants' fear of reprisal or backlash, the participant may not have the ability to recall the events. A participant's narration of events may change if they do not want to relive particular events. The interviewer must develop a trusting rapport with the participant where he or she will feel safe in sharing any emotional trauma and avoid story distortion (Creswell, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

To gain insight to the winding pathways of success for African American male students in higher education, this phenomenological study delved into the personal educational journeys of six African American male students. This research was conducted via narrative inquiry. By earning the trust of the participants, the researcher gained in-depth knowledge of the participants' educational experiences. Phenomenology is a deep exploration of the lived experiences of a group to understand a collective phenomenon shared across these individuals to form a rich and detailed description of human experience (Sadala & Adorno, 2001).

Conclusion

This research is intended to be meaningful, thoughtful, and necessary. Although there might be limitations in conducting this study, all steps were taken to ensure that the study was ethical and reliable. Knowing the factors that contribute to Black male students not graduating from college will enable higher education leadership and administrators to improve on the practices that would support them to achieve their academic goals. Not only will Black male students be better off academically as well as economically, but their communities will also be positively impacted. In the following chapter, the researcher will review the literature that discusses the issues that Black male students face as well as those that facilitate their success.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Understanding the factors that contribute to African American male students not graduating from college will enable higher education leadership and administrators answer the question, “Which Factors influence African American male students’ persistence and graduation from college?” Black student graduation rate remains at a dismally low 42%, nationwide. The *Black Student College Graduation (2019)* article reported further that Black women outpace Black men in college completions, with women graduating at 46%, while the men graduate 35% of the time. The researcher will endeavor to align the research topic with the factors and solutions gained or learned from the various sources of literature reviewed. As examples, according to Phillip (2011), the Community College of Philadelphia “through a series of assessments, uncovered a disturbing trend that seemed to be echoed at colleges across the country: African-American males were re-turning to college —and graduating — at a far lower rate than their peers” (p. 1). Hall and Rowan (2000) conducted a qualitative study that saw the process begin with an extensive literature review to ascertain what issues impeded the retention and/or graduation rates of African American males in higher education.

According to Nelson et al. (2020), Black males “matriculating into colleges are burdened with lots of “baggage to unpack” in the form of psychological stress, racism, stereotypes, bigotry, xenophobia, and lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion on campuses where they are conspicuous as the minority.” Nelson et al. (2020) noted further that, while some students are considered dependents in regard to their financial aid status, lack of financial support from their families due to their low-income backgrounds may be encountered, thus forcing them to be self-reliant. Not getting employment is another challenge that students may face because of systemic

inequalities. This adds to the many challenges faced by these underrepresented students (Nelson et al., 2020).

Black male students' experiences play a role in their educational success as they transition to college. Contributing to this status quo could also be attributed to how education has been criminalized. Heitzeg (2009) noted according Nocella II et al. (2014) and echoed by Edelman (2009), zero tolerance policies in schools have contributed to students being sent to jail for minor mistakes that are not to be considered as safety and security risk to the schools. If anything, these policies contributed to the school to prison pipeline, thus affecting opportunity advancement of students of color, especially Black male students. Nocella et al. noted:

> Zero tolerance has engendered a number of problems: denial of education through increased suspension and expulsion rates, referral to inadequate alternative schools, lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and racial profiling of students. … Once many of these youths are in "the system," they never get back on the academic track. Sometimes, schools refuse to readmit them; and even if these students do return to school, they are often labeled and targeted for close monitoring by school staff and police. Consequently, many become demoralized, drop out, and fall deeper and deeper into the juvenile or criminal justice systems. Those who do not drop out may find that their discipline and juvenile or criminal records haunt them when they apply for a scholarship or government grant or try to enlist in the military or find employment. In some places, a criminal record may prevent them or their families from residing in publicly subsidized housing. In this era of zero tolerance, the consequences of child or adolescent behavior may long outlive students' teenage years. (p. 22)

Poor teacher training and a lack of cultural competence with diverse learners have contributed to Black students' experiences as they transition to college (Edelman, 2009; Nocella II et al., 2014; Nelson, 2020). Nocella II et al. (2014) called for "strategies to reconnect alienated youth within a school community that fosters connectedness among teachers, students, parents, and administrators" (p. 46).

Nocella II et al. (2014) uncovered a disturbing trend that seemed to be echoed across the country that: there has been recent cases of police officers arresting children as young as 5 years in handcuffs from kindergarten "booked, fingerprinted, and charged with felonies for behavior that is equivalent to a temper tantrum" (p. 90). The same trend as mentioned by Nocella II et al. (2014) is also reported by Edelman (2009) that:

> "Incarceration is becoming the new American apartheid, and poor children of color are the fodder. It is time to sound a loud alarm about this threat to American unity and community, act to stop the growing criminalization of children at younger and younger ages, and tackle the unjust treatment of minority youths and adults in the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems with urgency and persistence." (p. 67)

This shows how African American male students start experiencing these scenarios early on in their lives. By the time they are joining college, they have already faced a lot of challenges. Nocella II et al. (2014) argued further that, high-stakes testing create incentives for schools to push out lower achieving students, instead of keeping them in schools and educating them. By so doing, the schools would boost their test-score profiles at the expense of banishing Black students from the schools. Both Heitzeg (2009) and Edelman (2009) concurred with Nocella II et al. (2014) arguments that the test scores affected mostly Black students as they were pushed to incarceration three times more than the rate of White and Latino students.

The authors also discussed a unique set of influences that help in reducing recidivism. For example, those who participate in educational programs while incarcerated are less likely to reoffend. The availability of educational programs such as the study of literature, and liberal arts, has helped provide opportunities to those incarcerated not only to become writers, but also to boost their confidence of pursuing higher education upon their release (Edelman, 2009; Heitzeg, 2009; Nocella et al. 2014). However, Taylor (2008) reported and corroborated by Nocella II et al. (2014) that many of those who were incarcerated struggled to pay for college since 1994 when President Bill Clinton barred them from receiving Pell Grant.

Harris (2018), on his part, discussed a unique set of influences that interfere with the college progression and success of Black males more than most other race and ethnic groups. The author indicated that these factors prevent the demonstration of academic skill and mastery consistent with actual ability and competence levels and are collectively referred to as the saboteur. For example, Harris (2018) discussed the saboteurs as, “a collection of cognitions and emotions (unconscious and subconscious) that result in self-defeating patterns and negatively impact behavior to defend against or protect the self from pain or discomfort” (p. 80). Robertson and Mason (2008) identified faculty involvement, financial assistance, classroom environment, academic and personal support resources, extracurricular activities and the students’ ability to handle racism, as the most important institutional factors to Black male matriculation.

To enhance retention and increase graduation rate, the Community College of Philadelphia started a mentor program “in which support coaches provide guidance in all areas of a student's life —whether personal, professional or legal” (Phillip, 2011, p. 1). This kind of program could be replicated in other colleges for the enhancement of African American male students’ retention and graduation rate. As reported by Harris (2018), researchers and writers

have called for strategies and interventions (e.g., masculine transition and campus support program) that will enhance the college performance and graduation rates of Black males. According to Rhoden (2017):

> There were three areas that were critical in examining participants acquiring a level of trust that manifests itself in their being able to positively achieve academically. Trust in themselves, trust in close others, and institutional trust were all instrumental in the academic achievement of the participants. (p. 57)

Robertson and Mason (2008) recommended the following suggestions be implemented to attain improvement in Black male student's college retention; i) precollege programs that emphasize study skills and resource acquisition, ii) make earnest and sincere efforts to recruit African American faculty and staff, and iii) the addition of courses that are part of the university's core curriculum and that address the needs of Black people throughout the Diaspora. (p. 85)

Synthesis of Literature

Various authors provided hope and potential for improvement, as well as a level of similarities that related to African American male students not graduating from college ([peer-reviewed articles, e.g., Harris (2018), Hall and Rowan (2000), and Wood and Palmer (2013)]). In other words, the similarities carry more weight even though their findings or outcomes may somewhat be different. In general, they point toward a common goal or simply put, they bring out the same concept, which is reported by the NBC June 2020 You Tube Video *How Schools Are Funneling Black Students Into The Prison System |Think | NBC News|* (NBC News, 2020). The Study, which was carried out in Texas, revealed that 97% of the State's academic suspensions were made by the School Administrators for subjective reasons. Black students are

31% more likely to receive discretionary suspension than White students. In the same breath, Nocella II et al. (2014) reported that:

> shifts in educational policy provide the immediate impetus for the flow of children from school to legal systems. The school to prison pipeline is facilitated by several trends in education that most negatively impacts students of color. These include growing poverty rates and declining school funding, resegregation of schools by race and class, underrepresentation of students of color in Advanced Placement courses and over-representation in special education tracks, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), high-stakes testing, and rising drop-out/push-out rates. (p. 19-20)

The literature reported that researchers and writers have called for strategies and interventions that will enhance not only elementary/high school students' education performance, but also college performance and graduation rates of Black men. Hall and Rowan (2000) suggested that in order for higher education to maximize the benefit of human development, they would have to design/redesign policies that will accommodate African American male students. In other words, the policies should be flexible enough to allow the African American male students to fit in successfully in the school's culture as it is different from their own culture.

Defining American Male Students

Ogbu and Simmons' (1998) *Voluntary and Involuntary Minorities: A Cultural-Ecological Theory of School Performance with Some Implications for Education,* defined two types of African American parents: a) Involuntary (Nonimmigrant) Minorities – are people who have been conquered, colonized, or enslaved. In other words, they had been made to be part of the U.S. against their will; and b) Voluntary (Immigrant) Minorities – are those who have more

or less willingly moved to the United States because they expect better opportunities than they had in their homelands or places of origin. For the purposes of this study, African American male students will include only Black males born in the US. In other words, the interviewees are all involuntary minorities. The terms African American male students and Black male students will be used interchangeably, so to be consistent with the literature explored.

Problems/Factors Contributing to low rate of Retention/Graduation

The articles bring forth two categories of factors or problems that African American male students face that negatively impact their rate of graduation: 1) Experiences they may have had as they transition to college, and 2) Experiences they face while they are in college. In other words, higher education institutions experience low retention and low graduation rates for these students due to these experiences. The literature reviewed show that these factors or problems as mentioned earlier, are somewhat similar yet different.

Experiences that African American Undergraduate Male Students may have had as they Transition to Campus Life

The articles mention various factors or challenges that African American undergraduate male students may have faced as they transition to campus life. Consequently, these experiences may negatively impact their rate of graduation. In other words, higher education institutions experience low retention and low graduation rates for these students due to the various factors or experiences encountered by this disadvantaged group. It worth noting that, not all Black male students may have had “prison” experience. However, the following are the factors that some of the students may have experienced as they transition to campus.

The School to Prison Pipeline. Nocella II et al. (2014) argued that:

> In the last decade, the punitive and overzealous tools and approaches of the modern criminal justice system have seeped into our schools, serving to remove children from mainstream educational environments and funnel them onto a one-way path toward prison. … The School-to-Prison Pipeline is one of the most urgent challenges in education today. (p. 11)

Nelson and Lind (2015) also argued that in many cases, schools are responsible for pushing students into the juvenile justice system by having them arrested. The African American male students' education progression and success is slowed by these challenges as they transition to college. These interruptions prevent acquisition and demonstration of academic skills and mastery consistent with actual ability and competence levels of these upcoming undergraduate students. The school to prison pipeline is as a result of schools that criminalize petty disciplinary issues through zero tolerance policies, having police presence in the school compound and using suspensions and expulsions for petty infractions (Nelson & Lind, 2015, & Nocella II et al., 2014).

Media Construction of Crime and Criminals. According to Nocella II et al. (2014) "a substantial body of research documents the role of media - especially television - in constructing perceptions of crime and public images of the criminal, and subsequently shaping attitudes, everyday interactions, and public policy" (p. 13). These perceptions as also reported by Heitzeg (2009), portrayed the African American and Hispanic males as perpetrators of rape, robbers, and murderers, and the typical victim is White people. Nocella II et al. (2014) noted that these assumptions to be not true. TV news constructs of a picture of crime, criminals, and victims are not data supported argued Heitzeg (2009). Black males in particular, are over-represented as

offenders and are not seen as victims, (Heitzeg, 2009, & Nocella II et al., 2014). In other words, they are over-represented as "criminals," thus carrying this "tag" so to speak, wherever they go, including transition to college as well as putting them at a disadvantage as compared to other races, especially the Whites. Nocella II et al. revealed further that:

> Widespread acceptance of this stereotype by the general public has implications for everyday interactions that youth of color have in public places, with employer, with teachers, with public officials, and with the police. Prejudice and stereotype acceptance can lead to miscommunications between black students and white teachers; this is a possible contributor to the racial disproportionality in suspension and expulsion." (p. 15)

This has indeed, contributed to the Black male students in failing to successfully pursue their education at the undergraduate level.

The Rise of the Prison Industrial Complex. Edelman (2009) reported that "Of the 2.3 million people in jail or prison, 64 percent are minority" (p. 67). While Nocella II et al. on the other hand reported that:

> During the past 40 years there has been a dramatic escalation in the U.S. prison population, a ten-fold increase since 1970. Of the more than 2.2 million persons in the state or federal prisons and jails, "approximately 50% of all prisoners are black, 30% are white, and about 17% Latinos, with Blacks being imprisoned at more than 9 times the rate of Whites. (p. 16).

The authors observed that this mass incarceration is tied to the profit motive. The prison maintenance and upkeep used to be catered for by the taxpayers. It is no longer the case today. If anything, now the so-called prison industrial complex is but a "source of corporate profit, government agency funding, cheap neo-slave labor, and employment for economically depressed

regions" (Nocella II et al., 2014, p. 17). And where do they get this cheap neo-slave labor from, and where are they housed? The cheap neo-slave labor of course is the "criminalized" Black men and are housed in the prison industrial complex, asserted Heitzeg (2009). The slavery came back through the back door (Edelman, 2009).

Heitzeg (2009) disclosed that policies have been purposely and intentionally put in place to help supply the prisons with the right type of "customers." These customers, who happen to be African American men, end up joining college after having gone through "valleys" and "mountains" of challenges placed along their way. For example, these experiences include (Nocella II et al., 2014),

> Enhanced police presence in poor neighborhoods and communities of color; racial profiling; mandatory minimum and "three-strikes" sentencing; draconian conditions of incarceration and a reduction of prison services that contribute to the likelihood of "recidivism"; and "collateral consequences" that nearly guarantee of continued participation in "crime" and return to the prison industrial complex following initial release—have major implications for youth of color. (p. 17-18)

The articles have thus far revealed what kind of experiences African American males go through before joining college. These challenges indeed contribute to determining whether Black male students successfully graduate from college or not. Higher institutions of learning should know or take serious note of what Black men pass through before reaching their gates. By so doing, they will be in a better position to guide them through their college years effectively, as well as successfully to the day of their graduation

Zero Tolerance and Policing in the Hallways. As mentioned above, the media and the rise of the prison industrial complex has played a role in creating a fertile ground for young

African American men to be labelled as criminals, hence making them the target of incarceration. Additionally, the educational policy known as “zero tolerance” has been the main fuel in accelerating the flow of minority students from their schools to the legal systems as the literature reports. Nelson and Lind’s (2015) study reported that:

> When a school allows a School Resource Officer to arrest a student — or, less drastically and more commonly, refers a student to law enforcement or juvenile court as a form of discipline — they're turning that student over to the juvenile justice system. That makes it that much easier for a student to get a juvenile record (so even if punishment for a first offense is light, punishment for a second offense is likely to be much harsher). This happens way more at schools with officers. A report by the Justice Policy Institute found that, even controlling for a school district's poverty level, schools with officers had five times as many arrests for "disorderly conduct" as schools without them. (para 11-12)

Nocella II et al. (2014) also affirmed Nelson and Lind’s (2015) study, that zero tolerance is responsible for the following:

- Feeding the school to prison pipeline
- Providing the direct mechanism by which students are removed from school by suspension/expulsion, pushed toward dropping out, charged in juvenile court, and routed into the prison pipeline
- Increased police and security presence at school, metal detectors, security cameras, locker and person searches, and all the accoutrements of formal legal control
- Suspension, expulsion, and the arrest and charging in juvenile or adult courts of the violators who majority happens to be Black students

- Involving harsh disciplinary consequences such as long-term and/or permanent suspension or expulsion
- Applying punishment for serious violations to minor or nonviolent violations of rules such as tardiness and disorderly conduct. (p. 20-21)

Racial Disproportionality. According to Heitzeg (2009) and Nocella II et al., zero tolerance policies are to be applied to all students equally regardless of race, class, or gender. However, a growing body of research points to the contrary as Nocella II et al. described:

> Criminalized education disproportionately impacts the poor, students with disabilities, LGBT students, and youth of color, especially African Americans, who are suspended, expelled, and arrested at the highest rates, despite comparable rates of infraction. The U.S. Department of Education, Civil Rights Division, documents the disparity. Nationally, Black students were three and a half times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers. One in five black boys and more than 1 in 10 black girls received an out-of-school suspension. Since research has found no indication that African American youth violate rules at higher rates than do other groups, the persistence of stereotypes of young black males, and "cultural miscommunication" between students and teachers is often cited as one key factor. Eighty-three percent of the nation's teaching ranks are filled by Whites, mostly women, and stereotypes can shape the decision to suspend or expel. (p. 23)

Nelson and Lind (2015) also revealed that:

> Black students are suspended or expelled three times more frequently than white students. And while black children made up 16 percent of all enrolled children in 2011-12, according to federal data, they accounted for 31 percent of all in-school arrests.

> Several studies have looked at the relationship between race, behavior, and suspension, and none have them have proven that black students misbehave at higher rates. A study in 2002 found that white students were more likely to be disciplined for provable, documentable offenses — smoking, vandalism, and obscene language — while black students were more likely to be disciplined for more subjective reasons, such as disrespect. (para 15)

The "criminal" tag placed on African American male students as well as cultural miscommunication, has worked against their success as they transition to college. These experiences contribute to the low graduation rate statistics in colleges.

Increased Rates of Suspensions and Expulsions. Approximately 3.3 million suspensions and more than 100,000 expulsions are experienced annually by elementary and secondary students according to Nocella II et al. (2014). In addition, zero tolerance policies have also seeped downward to impact preschool children (Heitzeg, 2009). Nelson and Lind (2015) asserted that schools with more Black students tend to have higher rates of suspension. This goes to show that Black male students start facing school related challenges right from the moment they step into preschool. These traumatizing and challenging moments follow them all the way to college thus pointing to the more reasons why their graduation rate is low. Heitzeg (2009) reported that students who are suspended or expelled face more challenges. For example:

> Students are deprived of educational services and, at best referred to sub-standard alternative schools. Many states fail to offer any access to alternative schools. Students are left to fend for themselves, and if they are re-instated are now further behind their peers and more likely to be suspended again. (p. 13)

By highlighting these experiences, higher education administrators and leaders will be better positioned in assisting these students succeed in their academic aspirations.

Elevated Drop-Out Rates. Heitzeg (2009) reported that increased drop-out rates are directly connected to the continued use of suspension and expulsion. Nocella II et al. (2014) asserted also that "students who have been suspended or expelled are more likely to experience poor academic performance, and eventually drop-out" (p. 26). This situation is brought about by the zero tolerance policies. Critics have noted that these policies have been used to "push-out" low performing students so the schools may improve in their test scores as well as not to lose school funding (Heitzeg, 2009 & Nocella II et al.). When students are not in school often, catching up with their studies and acquiring the necessary knowledge to succeed in college becomes difficult. These experiences, therefore, make their graduation from college more unlikely.

Interrupting the School to Prison Pipeline. In an effort to interrupt the school to prison pipeline due to overwhelming referrals from schools, Nelson and Lind (2015) reported on how juvenile courts in Clayton County Georgia:

> Made an agreement with the police force and the school district, restricting the cases in which police were allowed to arrest students in school or refer them to court. The agreement had a huge impact in schools: the high-school graduation rate increased by 24 percent from 2004 to 2010, beating the national average. (para 30)

Interrupting the school to prison pipeline analogy will go a long way not only in improving the lives of the young African American men but will also benefit the community at large. On the other hand, Nocella II et al. (2014) discussed on the effects of missing out from school in that:

> Many of these young people never reenter the mainstream educational system, and the loss to the society is immeasurable. Not only do communities lose the potential talents that these students hold, but they also commit themselves to expending vast resources—

far greater than the resources it would take to adequately fund public education—to deal with the problems that these students will likely pose when they grow into adults. (p. 29)

Doing nothing to interrupt this pipeline does not only deny higher institutions of learning of potential students, but also the community misses out on potential talents.

The Schoolhouse as Jailhouse

Zero Tolerance, Zero Logic

Nocella II et al. (2014) reported that "the post-Columbine hysteria has not evaporated" (p. 40), even after more than a decade of its occurrence. Students are still experiencing its effect as Congress joined the bandwagon in passing laws such as Drug Free Schools Act to be adopted by schools as well as put in place strict rules against students in possession of drugs and alcohol while on campus. Nocella II et al., however, argue that "it is the zero-tolerance approach to student behavior that has caused the most far-reaching damage, unleashing an epidemic of suspensions that jeopardizes hundreds of thousands of students' futures" (p. 41).

According to Heitzeg (2009), zero tolerance has been discredited for being vague and for failing to give local school administrators discretion in determining the application of these policies. Also, Heitzeg (2009) argued further that, the statutory vagueness makes it hard for students to know what exactly is prohibited which then allows officials' discretion in suspending and expelling students for minor mistakes. These policies have defied logic as they continue to be applied in schools for the acceleration of students to jailhouses.

The Security State Goes to School

Zero tolerance disciplinary codes as Heitzeg (2009) study revealed, embraces security technologies which are associated with prisons. For example, technologies include surveillance cameras to metal detectors to more recent biometric scanners. All these tools are used in

detecting and defeating “crime” in schools, so to speak. Schools are no longer a safe place for African American male students. Nocella II et al. (2014) reminded us that these technological strategies have not only encroached on civil liberties or privacy of students, but also for the teachers. Having more of these gadgets to enforce security measures creates what the authors call “a high level of disorder” in which students “tend to engage in more acts of self-protection and live in a heightened state of fear” (Nocella II et al., p. 51). This scenario is replicated when these students transition to college and would indeed contribute negatively to their academic success.

Targets for Arrest

Students of color according to Heitzeg (2009), Nelson and Lind (2015), and Nocella II et al., have been the target for arrest. Even though Black students made up 16 percent of all enrolled students in 2011-12, they accounted for 31 percent of all in-school arrests (Nelson & Lind, 2015). Nocella II et al., argued that “in this country putting people in prison is a higher priority than keeping children in school” (p. 81). For this reason, those students who make it to college find themselves not adequately prepared for the challenges ahead, as they were sent to jail instead of home with homework. Again, these students carry these experiences with them and adds to the many challenges that make them not graduate from college. It is therefore, “in the best interest of children, educators, and American citizens to keep our young people in school and not march them off to their prison cell,” asserted Nocella II et al. (p. 99).

By knowing beforehand what this group of students goes through as they transition to college, higher education leadership will mitigate low graduation rates by preparing for the students’ success. Nelson et al. (2020) added that stakeholders purposefully engage in conversations on thoughts and feelings about the traumatic events that have occurred and

continue to occur regarding racial discrimination and police brutality against the Black men in the society.

Transforming Justice

Instead of sending students to the justice system for school related discipline, Nelson and Lind (2015) reported that, “Other schools are exploring restorative justice programs, which focus on forming relationships between teachers, students, and administrators and giving students an opportunity to resolve problems by talking about them.” This concept is also mentioned by Nocella II et al., and if learned and practiced by teachers, administrators, counselors, and staff, would go a long way in managing, resolving, and/or transforming “conflict in schools—from kindergarten to twelfth grade and beyond” (p. 210). Transformative justice features include (Nocella II et al., 2014):

- It places issues of inequality, oppression, and domination at the forefront
- It takes a systems approach to conflict, recognizing that we are all interconnected: the offender and the victim, one’s choices and one’s situation, the community and its social structures, power differential among all involved in a crime
- It argues that we are all involved in complex relations of oppressors and oppressed, dominators and dominated
- It is not about destroying and building anew, and it’s not about creating win-lose solutions common to social revolutions in which the oppressed become the new oppressors
- It instead, asks that everyone and everything change—we as individuals, as well as our systems, structures, and relations

- It looks for the good in others while also acknowledging the complex systems that we all live within. (p. 216)

Transformative justice as mentioned above, if learned and applied by institutions of higher learning, would not only benefit African American male students in their academic pursuits and successfully graduating from college but will also hold accountable those in higher education leadership.

Transformative Prison System in Norway

According to the *Prison System in Norway (Norway's Prisons Vs. America's Prisons*) YouTube Video, Norway is many steps ahead as it has the most innovative prison system in the world. The prison system in Norway echoes what transformative justice helps to achieve as discussed above. For example, unlike America's prison guards, Norway's guards are trained to treat prisoners with respect and dignity. In America, prisoners are treated like slaves.

The YouTube Video discussed four key elements or principles that they follow in handling the prisoners: a) **Normality** – prisoners are permitted to lead a normal life while they are in prison. The fact that one is in prison, does not mean that they should be deprived their normal life experiences. b) **Focus on humanity** – guards treat the prisoners like fellow human beings. They don't judge them. The prison is not there to judge or punish them. c) **Dynamic Security** – the guards have normal relationships with the prisoners. For example, they play cards together and treat them well. d) **An emphasis on reintegration into the society** – opportunity to prepare oneself to leave prison and have a good life based on how the prisoners are treated.

Activists, researchers, and correction officials from the USA visited this prison in Norway, considered "The World's Most Humane Prison" for inspiration. We further learn that when people are treated with respect and dignity, trust is developed as well as low recidivism is

experienced. America should borrow this idea from Norway on how to handle prisoners. By so doing, those released from prison (mostly Black men) have the potential to be better off to pursue their college aspirations with confidence and courage.

Factors/Challenges African American Male Students Face While in College

Cognitions and Emotions

Harris (2018) discusses a unique set of influences that interfere with the college progression and success of African American males more than most other race and ethnic groups. The author says that these factors prevent the demonstration of academic skills and mastery consistent with actual ability and competence levels and are collectively referred to as the *saboteur*. Nelson et al. (2020) on the other hand, reported that mental health in the Black community is stigmatized. Consequently, Black males could be facing depression that often result from traumatic events encountered before joining college, and thus affects their academic achievements. To arrest the situation, Nelson et al. (2020) recommended that both advisors and Black males should seek assistance from a mental health professional if the following symptoms are exhibited by the students (para 12):

- Anger, irritability, and aggressiveness
- Feeling restless, anxious, or on edge
- Loss of interest in work, family, or once-pleasurable activities
- Feeling sad, empty, flat, or hopeless
- Problems with sexual desire and performance
- Not being able to concentrate or remember details
- Overeating or not wanting to eat at all
- Thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts

- Physical aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems
- Inability to meet the responsibilities of work, caring for family or self, or other important activities
- Engaging in high-risk activities
- A need for alcohol or drugs to cope
- Withdrawing from family friends or becoming isolated (National Institute of Mental Health, 2020)

Lack of Trust

Rhoden (2017) on the other hand, noted that young African American males have traditionally been cautious when it comes to trusting people in general due to the way they have been culturally stereotyped as being intellectually inferior. This has contributed to them failing in pursuing their education. Robertson and Mason (2008) in their study reported on how the following form of racial discrimination against the Black males "reduces the possibility of academic success and lowers graduation rates" (p. 7): (1) aggression; (2) exclusion, including social ostracism; (3) dismissal of subculture; and (4) typecasting, i.e. suggesting that all Blacks are alike.

Institutional Factors

In their research, Robertson and Mason (2008) identified a lack of the following: faculty involvement, financial assistance, classroom environment, academic and personal support resources, extracurricular activities and the African American male students' inability to handle racism, as the institutional factors that impede Black male students from graduating from college.

A study by Davis, Coward and Jackson (2013), found the relationship between selected academic factors, institutional factors, and the retention rate among African American male freshmen students enrolled in higher education institutions. The institution was in the southern region of the United States with an above average African American male student clientele. A sample of 200 freshmen African American male college students was selected from the institutional data file over the academic school years between 2008 to 2012 (Davis et al., 2013). The study found that there is a relationship between the selected academic factors (e.g. ACT or GPA), institutional factors (e.g. support) and the retention rate of African American male students in the institution (Davis et al., 2013).

Aspirations and goals

In the Project Empowerment (PE), a campus-based student organization designed to enhance African American male retention, Simmons (2013) discovered factors that help explain retention among African American male members of a student support organization included:

- Aspirations and goals
- Social integration
- Minority faculty engagement, and
- Student organizational involvement (p. 62)

Brooks, Jones, and Latten (2014), on the other hand, sought to identify personal characteristics associated with African American male educational success. Brooks et al. (2014) argued that the disparity between the academic success of minority and White students continues in post-secondary schools, with African American male students being impacted the most. Personal characteristics in this regard is one of the factors that plays a role in the success of African American male student as identified by Brooks et al. (2014).

Lack of Academic and Personal Support

The Community College of Philadelphia started a mentor program "in which support coaches provided guidance in all areas of a student's life —whether personal, professional or legal" (Phillip, 2011) after discovering African American male students' low graduation rate.

Factors that Support the Retention and Graduation Rate of African American Male Students

The literature reviewed brought forth factors that, if put in place by higher education leadership, would go a long way in enhancing the retention and graduation rate of African American male students. Here are some of the factors:

Themed Factors

The following are two different factors that contribute to the retention and graduation rate of African American male students in their own unique ways as reviewed.

Aspirations among other themes. Simmons (2013) uncovered four themes, as follows: a) college preparedness, b) high aspirations and goals, c) social connections and relationships, and d) growth through student organization commitment, which relate to the factors mentioned earlier. The author pointed out that these factors could contribute to higher education's way of knowing about retaining African American male students. However, Simmons concluded by recommending that more research be undertaken with more students and organizations, as this study was conducted within a single institutional context and organization.

Achieve financially. The analysis undertaken by Brooks et al. (2014) showed that students within STEM majors were motivated to achieve academically because they associated academic success with financial success. Overall, the results of this study offered some insight such as associated with African American male student success. This information is beneficial to

higher education administrators, faculty, and staff, who seek to recruit and retain Black male students on their campuses (Brooks et al., 2014).

Institutional Factors

Robertson & Mason (2008) recommended consideration of the following:

> (1) Precollege programs that emphasize study skills, resource acquisition, (2) Make earnest and sincere efforts to recruit African American faculty and staff, (3) The addition of courses that are part of the university's core curriculum and that address the needs of Black people throughout the Diaspora. (p. 18))

In addition, Nelson et al. (2020) reported that:

> Institutions could be proactive in mitigating financial, time-management, and stress-related variables for Black male students by providing on-campus employment such as work study, internship, and paid research opportunities to support their development, financial obligations, and retention. On-campus employment opportunities could help Black male students manage their schedules more efficiently by decreasing the amount of time they might spend traveling to and from off-campus job sites, and then back to campus for school-related obligations. (para 7)

Trust

Rhoden (2017) identified the following three areas that participants exhibited as critical in acquiring the level of trust that would help them in meeting positively their academic achievement; a) trust in themselves, b) trust in close others, and c) trust in the institution. On the other hand, Nelson et al. (2020) reported that institutions should be conscious of the fact that Black males may experience re-traumatization of past experiences of racial discrimination

because of the recent racialized events in our country. Nelson et al. (2020) argued that students should be reminded and encouraged to find someone to speak with about their feelings if trauma recurs. According to Robertson and Mason (2008), “Racial prejudice leads to feelings of social alienation, which can create a contentious university experience that may result in stress, anxiety and poor academic performance” (p. 5).

Academic and Personal Support

To enhance retention and increase graduation rates, the Community College of Philadelphia started a mentor program “in which support coaches provide guidance in all areas of a student's life —whether personal, professional or legal” (Phillip, 2011, p. 1). This kind of program could be replicated in other colleges for the enhancement of African American male students’ retention and graduation rates. As reported by Harris (2018), researchers and writers have called for strategies and interventions (e.g. masculine transition and campus support program) that will enhance the college performance and graduation rates of Black males.

Nelson et al. (2020) concurred with Phillip’s (2011) arguments that, college staff should be intentional, empathetic, strategic, and patient when providing guidance, development, and support for Black male students to help them develop a healthy work/school/life balance. Black males according to Nelson et al. (2020), should be reminded not to feel compelled to explain or teach about race, racial discrimination, and/or police brutality against Black men to their White counterparts, as this helps in reducing the level of distress among the Black male students.

On the other hand, Brooks et al. (2014) reported that students who exhibited the following characteristics were high achieving students:

- Intrinsic motivation to overcome external barriers such as poverty and institutional racism

- Personal sources of inspiration and perseverance to strive academically
- Personal achievement goals as being the first one in their family to finish college
- Relationship with male role model within their household
- Raised in families with high levels of parental academic engagement (p. 8)

Diversity involvement

Wood and Palmer (2013) reported that when Black male students are exposed to diversity, they are more likely to transition from a community college to a four-year institution. The study further revealed that the more African American male students interacted with their peers as well as involved themselves with various activities within the college, not only did it increase their chances of transition to a four-year college or university, but also gave them a sense of belonging (Wood & Palmer, 2013). Wood and Palmer concluded by recommending that future research should have college professionals:

> Working to increase inter-group dialogue, understanding, and interactions. In particular, the college classroom can serve as a platform for diverse interactions. Faculty should consider how to use class discussions, small group work, and out-of-class activities to foster linkages with diverse peers. (p. 283)

Nelson et al. (2020) also noted that Black males should be encouraged to join affinity groups with other Black males that meet regularly in order to discuss issues of racial discrimination and other experiences encountered on campus. By so doing, a space is provided for collaboration on how to address the issues encountered as well as give each other sound advice.

Flexible Policies

According to Hall and Rowan (2000), in acting out the function of human development in a multicultural and in a multiracial domain, higher education plays a dual role: a) developing knowledge and skills, and b) when the acquired knowledge and skills are applied, society benefits. For this reason, when African American male students do not graduate from college, then society misses out on role models that support and inspire the future generations of Black males to pursue a college degree and become financially independent. As a viable alternative, the authors suggest that higher education can maximize the benefit of human development by designing/redesigning policies to accommodate African American male students (Hall & Rowan, 2000). In other words, the policies should be flexible enough to allow the African American male students to fit in successfully in the college culture as it is different from their own.

Academic Factors

The study by Davis, Coward and Jackson (2013) found out that there is a relationship between the selected academic factors (e.g. ACT or GPA), institutional factors (e.g. support) and the retention rate of African American male students in the institution. For this reason, the authors recommended that the higher education enterprise develops avenues that will best assist African American male students and their minority peers stay in school to reach their academic goals despite the reported overall misfit between them and the institution. According to Brooks et al. (2014), "academic support such as concentrated tutoring, curriculum advisement, and continued emotional supported is need to adequately ensure students being successful within the STEM fields" (p. 9). Nelson et al. (2020) reported that Black males should be apprised that "power lies in completing their education." Nelson et al. (2020) asserted that completing the aspired degree creates a greater platform for Black males to seek justice, transformation, and

prosperity within the Black community and beyond. Robertson and Mason (2008) reported that "African American students perform better in classes where the course content is reflective of their experiences and interest" (p. 3). Classroom environment makes a difference. In other words, "when professors integrate information about accomplishments of African Americans into the content of the class, the interest of Black students increase and they are more likely to perform better (Robertson & Mason, 2008).

Retention Program

Another study by Brooks, Jones, and Burt (2013), revealed statistically significant results when comparing students who participate in a freshmen retention program to those students who do not. African American male participants in this study stated having stronger relationships with mentors, better university academic acculturation, and improved social integration into the university community (Brooks et al., 2013). In a following article, Brooks et al. (2014) noted that:

> Black male retention and support programs should concentrate more effort into supporting their participants beyond their first year. In addition to providing need-based financial aid, administrators must also provide a career-focused curriculum for Africa-American males who, according to this study, associate academic achievement with economic success. More importantly, African American male students should be exposed to other Black professionals who have benefitted from educational attainment. (p. 9)

In order to understand and fully support the Black male students in their academic quest, Nelson et al. (2020) reported that professional development centered on cultural competence and awareness, should be undertaken. Nelson et al. (2020) further reported that advisors should aim to become co-conspirators, willing and ready for action rather than just becoming an ally by only

showing empathy to their plight. Nelson et al. (2020) also recommended the following steps for advisors:

- Learn the difference between “co-conspirator” and “ally” (Move to End Violence, 2016)
- Active listening and knowing an issue are key but committing to action is far more reassuring and meaningful (Love, 2019)
- Show emotional support and encouragement by demonstrating to Black males that they are not just another statistic in the many students you advise
- Do not make assumptions or perpetuate stereotypes of Black male students based on the Black Lives Matter Movement
- Use mentorship as a method showing that you care about the Black male student
- Direct Black male students to campus resources such as counselling and psychological services, academic tutoring, and culturally relevant student organizations to enhance their leadership abilities that help them to become more engaged in the collegiate experience. (para 11)

Brooks et al. (2014) argued that “it is only reasonable and sensible for educators of higher institutions to be culturally responsive and intrigued when communicating about ways to ignite and cultivate such students and directly influence communities” (p. 9).

Positive Psychology

One other factor that influenced the retention and graduation of African American male students, is their individual determination to apply positive psychology in their educational aspirations. Gable & Haidt (2005) reported positive psychology as defined by Sheldon & King

(2001) that, “It is nothing more than the scientific study of ordinary human strengths and virtues” (p. 105). Sheldon & King (2001) explained further that:

> Positive psychology revisits "the average person," with an interest in finding out what works, what is right, and what is improving. It asks, "What is the nature of the effectively functioning human being, who successfully applies evolved adaptations and learned skills? And how can psychologists explain the fact that, despite all the difficulties, the majority of people manage to live lives of dignity and purpose?" (p. 216).

Gable & Haidt (2005) further revealed that:

> In one metaphor, psychology was said to be learning how to bring people up from negative eight to zero but not as good at understanding how people rise from zero to positive eight” (p. 103). But the aim of positive psychology is to study the other side of the coin—the ways that people feel joy, show altruism, and create healthy families and institutions—thereby addressing the full spectrum of human experience. Moreover, positive psychology makes the argument that these positive topics of inquiry are important to understand in their own right, not solely as buffers against the problems, stressors, and disorders of life. (p. 105)

In their article, Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) affirmed Gable & Haidt (2005) & Sheldon & King (2001) in their description of positive psychology as follows, “Prevention researchers have discovered that there are human strengths that act as buffers against mental illness: courage, future mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, and the capacity for flow and insight, to name several” (p. 7).

These articles pointed to the huge gaps in knowledge that may be challenges at the forefront of positive psychology in general (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Gable & Haidt,

2005; & Sheldon & King, 2001), as well as the gaps in the literature concerning the use of positive psychology by Black male students. Consequently, the researcher determined to examine and confirm the application of this factor during the interview process with the participants.

Analysis of Literature and Recommendation

The article by Brooks et al. (2013) displayed data with a positive impact on students' academic achievement when attention and support for students is increased. This is an experience that could be repeated by other institutions to enhance their African American male students' retention.

Heitzeg (2009), Nelson and Lind (2015), and Nocella II et al. (2014) reported various factors that Black male students face as they transition to college. These challenges were encountered by the students as soon as they commenced their education from kindergarten. For example, the literature argued on: how schools had been turned into the prison pipeline as a result of criminalizing petty disciplinary issues through zero tolerance policies and having police in school hallways (Nelson & Lind, 2015; Nocella II et al., 2014); construction by media in portraying Black male students as perpetrators of criminal activities (e.g. rape, murders, robberies, etc.) (Heitzeg, 2009; Nelson & Lind, 2015; Nocella et al., 2014); application of policies discriminately thus increasing the rates of suspensions and expulsions of students of color because of their race (Heitzeg, 2009; Nocella II et al., 2014); Black male students being the targets for arrest rather than being kept in school (Heitzeg, 2009; Nelson & Lind, 2015; Nocella et al., 2014); and the transformative justice being explored as an alternative option for resolving conflicts in schools, right from kindergarten to twelfth grade and beyond (Nelson & Lind, 2015; Nocella et al., 2014).

On the other hand, Brooks et al. (2014) reported that financial success was a motivating factor for students in achieving their academic aspirations. In other words, African American male students within the STEM majors associated their academic achievement with their financial achievement. However, Brooks et al. (2014) revealed that "students involved in STEM majors were younger than those students involved in non-STEM majors. This finding reflects the lower number of students who persist with the STEM as the curriculum becomes increasingly challenging" (p. 9). Davis et al. (2013) recommended that the higher education enterprise develop avenues that will best assist African American male students and their minority peers in staying in school and reaching their academic goals despite the reported overall misfit between them and the institution. In their research, Tolliver III and Miller (2018) used the voices of successful students in identifying strategies and resources that can be used to improve graduation opportunities of these students.

Hall and Rowan (2000) conducted a qualitative research that saw the process begin with an extensive literature review to ascertain which factors or challenges lowered the retention or graduation rates of African American males in higher education. As a viable alternative, the authors suggested that higher education can maximize the benefit of human development by designing/redesigning policies to accommodate African American male students. In other words, the policies should be flexible enough to allow the African American male students to fit in successfully in their new culture (Hall & Rowan, 2000).

The study from the *Prison System in Norway* YouTube video (Now this news, 2020) on the other hand, endeavored to answer the question "What kind of neighbor do we really want?" As we learn from the article, Norway has the most innovative prison in the world. Why? Because of how they treat people. When people are treated with respect and dignity irrespective of where

they are in life, they change for the better. Because the prison guards are trained and influenced on how they work inside the prison, the prisoners come out of prison with a positive outlook of life as well as with lower chances of recidivism. The concepts from the Norway prison should be replicated not only in the America's prisons, but also in higher education institutions. For example, treating the Black male students with respect and dignity will not only restore their confidence and positive outlook of life, but also will go a long way in enhancing their educational goals. This can only be achieved when all stakeholders are willing to embrace this great concept.

Harris (2018) reported that researchers and writers have called for strategies and interventions (e.g. masculine transition and campus support programs) that will enhance the college performance and graduation rates of Black males. Wood and Palmer (2013) concluded their study by recommending that future research should have college professionals incorporate inter-group dialogue, encourage diverse interactions and foster out-of-class activities. This study would not only be beneficial to community colleges but also to four-year colleges in enhancing the retention and graduation rate of African American male students (Harris, 2018).

According to Phillip (2011), the Community College of Philadelphia program could be replicated in other colleges for the enhancement of African American male students' retention and graduation rate. In the same breath, the article mentioned that if the program were expanded, the small-scaled intimacy would be lost. But more mentors can be recruited to help in continuing with the small-scaled intimacy "legacy" so to speak (Phillip, 2011). The positive results of the Rhoden (2017) study could be replicated in other institutions of higher learning so as to enhance the retention and graduation rate of African American male students. However, Rhoden (2017) reported that an area of weakness that could be addressed in follow-up research is the

involvement of a larger sample size, and an increased number of schools participating in the research. Simmons (2013) concluded by recommending that more research be undertaken with more students and organizations as his "study was conducted within a single institutional context and organization" (p. 72).

As for the positive psychology factor, Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) reported that negative emotions and experiences were viewed more urgently and, in most cases, overshadowed the positive ones. In other words, experiences that promoted happiness or positiveness were often neglected instead of utilizing them as a motivation in achieving, for example, academic aspirations (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, as there were gaps in the literature concerning the use of positive psychology in general as well as by Black male students, the researcher purposed to examine the utilization of this factor during the interview process with the participants (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Gable & Haidt, 2005; & Sheldon & King, 2001).

Recommended Course of Research

Throughout the literature, the authors provided several recommendations on areas requiring more research. For example, Brooks et al. (2014) recommended that future researchers who have interests in African American male success characteristics should consider the current data and examine the findings of this study with a qualitative analysis. The Brooks et al. (2014) study, investigated the "Factors Associated with Educational Success of African American Males" (p. 1). Simmons (2013) on the other hand, concluded by recommending that more research be undertaken with more students and organizations, as his "study was conducted within a single institutional context and organization" (p. 72). Moreover, Nocella II et al. (2014) recommended that:

> Prisons, guns, and armed guards are not the answer. Instead, we must start developing skills and alternative systems. Skills can include the ability to communicate, actively listen, build groups and teams of mutual support and understanding, forgive ourselves and others, and develop methods for positively transforming those who have hurt others. These skills must then become core practice in our communities, homes, schools, relationships, and places of work. To do this we need workshops, training, and education on the topics of peacemaking and social justice. Everyone must become involved—politicians, teachers, administrators, students, parents, and workers of all levels. (p. 212)

Developing these skills and undertaking alternative systems will curtail the current negative experiences encountered by African American undergraduate male students as they transition to campus. These experiences, as the literature revealed, would contribute to many students if they made it to college, facing challenges for which they are not adequately prepared (Nocella et al., 2014; Nelson & Lind, 2015).

According to Hall and Rowan (2000), in acting out the function of human development in a multicultural and in a multiracial domain, higher education plays a twofold function; a) impart understanding and competence, and b) The society benefits when what has been learned is put into practice. In other words, the society misses out on many fronts when African American male students do not graduate from college. For example, it misses out on role models that would otherwise support and inspire future generations of Black males to pursue high education and become financially stable, as well as support their families and in extension their communities, financially (Hall & Rowan, 2000).

Based on the data analyzed, higher education has not put in place modalities that will help Black male students as they join their campuses. As a viable alternative, the authors suggest

that higher education can maximize the benefit of human development by designing/redesigning policies to accommodate African American male students (Hall & Rowan, 2000). In other words, the policies should be flexible enough to allow the African American male students to fit in successfully in their new culture.

In their conclusion, Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi (2000) predicted that, "positive psychology in this new century will allow psychologists to understand and build those factors that allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish" (p. 13). There is gap in the literature as the understanding and application of positive psychology is still at an early stage, thus requiring more research (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Gable & Haidt, 2005; & Sheldon & King, 2001).

Conclusion

The aforementioned articles noted various factors or problems that African American male students experience as they transition to or while they are in college and that may negatively impact their rate of graduation. For example, their high school experiences, lack of trust, and a lack of institutional support are some of the experiences that affect African American students' success. According to Nelson et al. (2020), Black males "matriculating into colleges are burdened with lots of "baggage to unpack" in the form of psychological stress, racism, stereotypes, bigotry, xenophobia, and lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion on campuses where they are conspicuous as the minority." Even though some students are considered financial aid dependents, in most cases they do not get any financial support from their families due to their low-income backgrounds thus leading them to being self-reliant, revealed Nelson et al. (2020). This adds to the many challenges faced by these underrepresented students.

Phenomenology via a narrative inquiry is the best methodological approach in undertaking this qualitative research. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 75). Creswell and Poth (2018) noted further that a "narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals" (p. 71). By using phenomenology via a narrative inquiry in having the African American male students tell their personal stories, not only would it help verify/elucidate factors to corroborate available literature and findings within the literature, but would also help bring to light common meaning of their lived experiences.

According to Brooms (2019), "students reported that they were reacted to negatively, reported experiencing various forms of racial microaggressions, and experienced invisibility and alienation" while on-campus (p. 750). Robertson and Mason (2008) also asserted that, "students expressed myriad feelings and attitudes consistent with ostracism from both the larger White society in general and the university environment in particular" (p. 76).

Black male students' lived experiences and shared stories will not only reveal the myriad challenges to their academic success, retention, and persistence, but will also affirm to what the literature has alluded to as well as, shed to light the factors that would support their persistence and success efforts. In addition, it is helpful to understand how students disadvantaged by the system are able to persist and move on to college, even though they may not be set up for success.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

In attempt to understanding the winding pathways of success for African American male students in higher education, this phenomenological study delved into the personal educational journeys of several African American male students. This phenomenological research was conducted through narrative inquiry. Phenomenology is a deep exploration of the lived experiences of a group to understand a collective phenomenon shared across these individuals to form a rich and detailed description of human experience (Sadala & Adorno, 2001). Chapter Three will discuss the methodological stance including the research questions, the interview setting, research design, data collection and instrumentation, analysis, limitations, procedure, and ethical considerations.

In providing personal stories of African American male student's enrollment in college and the barriers they face, this research detailed African American male students' successful and unsuccessful journeys through higher education. The primary purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the experiences that impact African American male students' persistence and non-persistence in graduating from college. In the end, with the literature review and this qualitative study, it will be more apparent why college is the road less traveled by many African American male students.

Research Question(s)

The fundamental question of this study is: **"Which factors influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college?"** With this question as the focus, and other interview questions, common themes will be explored to understand and appreciate African American male students' entire educational journey, that of graduating from college and

the challenges they faced in their degree attainment process. The literature review provided context that helped in comparing the findings to the review so to see if there was agreement, disagreement, or new information. This was the heart of the research. Through the interviews and literature review, these secondary questions were addressed:

1. What made you graduate or not graduate from college? What experiences did you encounter? What challenges did you face?
2. What did you do to succeed?
3. In your opinion, did the college play any significant role in alleviating any challenges you faced?
4. What role did the instructors play in your success? In areas, you did not do well.
5. How did the community help you succeed in your college life?
6. Explain how you interacted with other students. Did they assist you when you faced challenges?
7. What other support did the college provide or not provide for your success?
8. What did you know about college success before joining college?
9. How did you handle challenges that came your way?
10. What else can you say that the college could have done to help you succeed?

Research Design

In an effort to broaden the knowledge of why African American male students make up the lowest percentage of students graduating from college, an intimate examination was completed through this qualitative study. The qualitative approach allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words and expose the human experience (Shotton et al., 2007). To identify factors that are impacting African American male students' persistence in

graduating from college and to understand this phenomenon, this study followed a constructivist paradigm. Guba & Lincoln (1998) defined constructivist paradigm as, "the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choices of method but in ontological and epistemological ways" (p. 195). In addition, "a constructivist stance maintains that learning is process of constructing meaning; it is how people make sense of their experience" (Merriam, Cafferella, and Baumgartner, 2007, p. 291). Also, Patel (2015) reaffirmed that, constructivist/interpretive is used to discover the underlying meaning of events and activities. Therefore, in learning about these experiences, the researcher acquired knowledge and meaning about the participants' lives.

Choosing a qualitative approach allowed the stories to be told clearly as well as bring forth rich and thick detailed description. In other words, extensive interviews were conducted with six African American male students, and the narrative inquiry offered in-depth stories that gave insights to each interviewee's personal journey. Six African American male students who have graduated from college were selected for interviews. These rich narratives from the interviews reflected short life histories focused around a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research methods are designed to understand more than what has already been understood by engaging in the process of people interpreting their experiences, how they construct their words, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam et al., 2007). Understanding how these African American male students were seeking to graduate from college and were able to persist will provide implications and a success plan for those who are falling short of earning a college degree. This research identified major themes and revealed personal stories of success and failure. This approach allowed for each participant's story to be told as well as offered an opportunity to identify underlying themes among these participants. To

enhance the study, the researcher gathered and summarized the results to explain trends from the interviews that will add to the existing literature.

Setting of the Study

The geographical location of this study will be Metropolitan State University (MSU). MSU is in St. Paul/Minneapolis, Minnesota which is where all interviews were conducted one-on-one in person, or via Zoom remote technology based on the current conditions. The interviews were conducted on campus or via Zoom based on the prevailing health guidance due to COVID 19 pandemic restrictions. This allowed for a neutral, yet familiar space for the interview to be conducted. The process of conducting interviews in an academic setting exemplified the focus on the educational experience of the participants in this study.

Participants

The purposive sampling approach was used to select African American male students that met this one criteria: African American male student who have graduated from college. The general population was African American male students with the target population being those that have graduated from college. The intent of the purposive sample was to interview African American male students who overcame barriers on their path to graduate from college. Through conversations with colleagues and fellow learners about completing this study, several participants' names were provided to the researcher. The sample size was kept small so that these students' lived experiences and stories could be shared. Six African American male students who have graduated from college were selected in order to bring out their successes as well as their struggles.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Prior to data collection, IRB and site approval was established. The researcher contacted the participants to explain the study and distributed the informed consent via email as from February of 2020. The informed consent is shown in Appendix A. The primary data was collected through one-on-one, in person, interviews or via Zoom meeting based on the prevailing conditions. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by following an interview protocol. According to Merriam (2009), following an interview protocol not only allows the research to gather intended data, but also informs the participant of important information. In following the protocol, the researcher engaged the participant in three phases of the interview process, the pre-interview, the interview, and post-interview (Creswell, 2009). In the pre-interview, the researcher prepared the participants for the interview, while the post-interview allowed for follow-up questions to gain clarification where necessary. The interview protocol is outlined in Appendix C.

While the interview questions were semi-structured, most questions were open-ended and allowed for follow-up questions. The answers to these questions provided thick and rich descriptions as well as insights into African American male students' decision-making processes (Creswell, 2012; Maxwell, 2013). These interview questions were generated by the researcher. The semi-structured interview questions are shown in Appendix C.

The average time for each interview was about 60 minutes. It was completely voluntary and confidential. The researcher used an audio recording device (Zoom technology and Phone recording features) to capture the exact responses. Transcription on the six selected interviews then occurred. During the interview process, the researcher also recorded hand-written field notes. These field notes helped construct follow-up questions and solicited more information. All

field notes were transcribed into a word document. Responses from the participants were digitally recorded using an electronic voice recording device. Dictation and transcription were completed using Zoom technology and typing in manually to Microsoft Word from the phone recording which allowed for accurate interview scripts.

Data Analysis

Data was collected entirely at the time of the interview. Each interview was coded by letters to keep confidentiality and to identify each interview. Both deductive and inductive coding was used in coding the data. The six interviews were broken down into themes related to the question. The researcher categorized the responses into these themes while preserving the participants' story. As narrative inquiry permits the researcher to ask research questions on perceived, subjective experiences of individuals or groups (Briggs, Coleman & Morrison, 2012), these questions focused on the educational journey of the participants. While themes emerged, each journey needed to be told in its entirety. These stories are shared, and the themes identified are reported under the research question in Chapter Four.

Procedures

The researcher's proposal defense was conducted in April of 2021, while the interviews were carried out between February 2020 and October 2021 based on the participants availability. Selected potential participants received an email with information on the study and the informed consent early February of 2020. Those participants who agreed to be interviewed received a follow-up invitation, and an interview was scheduled. Two one-on-one interviews were conducted, one was done over the phone, while the other three were conducted virtually using Zoom technology and were all completed by early mid-October 2021. Data were then transcribed and analyzed.

Researcher's Role

At the time of the study, the researcher had worked in higher education for over 12 years and served underrepresented students in a variety of roles. The researcher is the Gateway Student Services Associate, running the Metro State Gateway Student Services one-stop shop Minneapolis Campus Office. Metro State University strives to create an inclusive, anti-racist learning experience that empowers students, driving social change through individualized education. Creswell (2009) recommended that it is important for the researcher to identify themselves in the relation to the research topic when conducting a qualitative inquiry study. Regrettably, too many African American male students with great potential ended their educational journeys early. Therefore, the researcher wanted to look at the barriers that have impacted these students from persisting in higher education. Furthermore, the researcher was interested in discovering themes of persistence to better serve the students in the researcher's profession. Not only will the researcher be able to help improve services accordingly, but the researcher will also be able to share this information with their university and other institutions that serve African American male students. A passion to help African American male students and 12 years of higher education experience provided perspective and knowledge to guide the research questions and design of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout this study, ethical standards were maintained. Prior to conducting interviews, approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and every consideration was made to ensure anonymity of the interviewees. All participants were provided with an overview of the proposed study as well as an informed consent form (see Appendix A). Participants were enlightened that the interview was voluntary, and they could withdraw at or stop the recording at

any time. All data and recordings were kept confidential to ensure participants' anonymity. Each participant reviewed their narratives to ensure an accurate representation of their stories.

Limitations

Owing to the nature of a qualitative study, focusing on depth rather than breadth, the design of the study was somewhat limited. This study specifically focused on African American male students who have graduated from college, whether from a two-year or four-year institution. The study was not only to find a list of barriers and themes of persistence, but also to hear how these barriers affected the academic experience of the student. Additionally, the researcher also wanted to learn about themes of persistence and comprehend the path to success for the participants. Even though the aim of a qualitative study was not to find generalized finding or themes (Merriman, 1998), this may be regarded a limitation of the study. Nonetheless, the value of this methodology is in the capacity to acquire in-depth individual experience of the participants. Consequently, the researcher relied on the participants' recollection of past experiences, trusting memory and perception of experiences that occurred quite possibly years ago.

Conclusion

By adhering to a strict timeline, receiving IRB approval, and conducting interviews in the most ethical manner, this study proved to be significant and reliable. In establishing barriers and themes of persistence, an opportunity to make recommendations to institutions of higher learning on specialized services to support African American male students to successfully achieve their academic goals was gained. This research dove deep into the personal educational journeys of six African American male students and provided intimate stories of their academic adventure.

Chapter 4: Presentation of the Data

Considering that African American male students are underrepresented in higher education, this study attempted to understand the barriers and persistence factors that contributed to degree attainment for these students. Qualitative research techniques were used to provide rich descriptions of the educational journeys of six African American male students. These stories sought to answer the research question: **"Which Factors influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college?"** Further, these interviews looked to answer the following questions:

1. What made you graduate or not graduate from college? What experiences did you encounter? What challenges did you face?
2. What did you do to succeed?
3. In your opinion, did the college play any significant role in alleviating any challenges you faced?
4. What role did the instructors play in your success? In areas, you did not do well.
5. How did the community help you succeed in your college life?
6. Explain how you interacted with other students. Did they assist you when you faced challenges?
7. What other support did the college provide or did not provide for your success?
8. What did you know about college success before joining college?
9. How did you handle challenges that came your way?
10. What else can you say that the college could have done to make you succeed?

Overview of Analysis

Chapter 4 is constructed in two parts to offer an opportunity to share the personal narratives of the six participants and to present emerging themes. Barriers and themes of persistence emerged from the researcher's analysis of the narratives presented. Part I of Chapter 4 honored the essence of this narrative inquiry study and presented the six participants' personal academic stories. Part II of Chapter 4 is centered around the recurring themes that contributed to participants' college successes and (un)successes.

Collecting the Data

Primary data collection occurred in two phases. During the pre-interview stage, the participants were contacted through email to complete the implied consent form as well as to indicate their date of interview availability. Participants were interviewed based on their availability and their names were masked in order to protect them from harm (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For the interview stage, the one-on-one interviews occurred either in-person, over the phone or through the virtual environment, Zoom. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews were also recorded with a voice recorder or the Zoom meeting recording capability. While the interview questions were semi-structured, each interview was organic in nature to allow the participants to tell their personal stories as per their individual preferences.

Organization of Data

With over 115 pages of transcription from the one-on-one and/or phone interviews, the researcher narrowed down the transcription to include only the participants' responses to the interview questions. Those responses were used to create the narrative for each participant. The interview dictation was printed and organized in the order of participant's interview participation, starting with the first participant and ending with the last interview participant. The

narratives are shared in Part I of Chapter 4. Once each narrative was written, the researcher scanned the interview dictation for persistence factors and barriers. Colored Post-it notes marked barriers and persistence factors and the researcher highlighted supporting text. A table with text evidence was created and themes were established. The table of the themes is in Appendix D and described in Part II of Chapter 4.

Participants

To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for each of the participants. The pseudonyms used for the six participants were Willie, Max, Joe, Fred, Rich, and Leon. The names of mentors, and family members were not used. A total of six males were interviewed. All the participants were African American male students born in the United States of America. All the six participants have graduated from college: One with a doctorate degree, two with masters, while the remaining three have each graduated with an associate degree and are working towards their graduation from a four-year college.

As mentioned earlier, the participants narratives are captured based on the interview questions in seeking to answer the overall research question: **"Which Factors influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college?"** Each participant endeavored to bring forth their stories to the best of their ability.

Part I: Participant Narratives of their Educational Journeys

Willie

Willie made his first attempt at college in 1993, the year his daughter was born. That is when it dawned on him that he was going to raise her all by himself. Even though he had a job, he was homeless. He enrolled himself in a two-year college, Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC). He had no college experience whatsoever. When Willie joined the

college, there was nobody to help him figure out “what is what.” He ended up dropping out of school.

He came back to school almost ten years later. That was in 2010. From 2010 through 2013, Willie was determined to go through the process all the way to graduation. He had already figured out that it was not going to be easy. It was very hard for him the whole time. But at this point, Willie had already established his goal. He had to learn how to juggle his work with his education, while not to having the benefit of overtime at his workplace. He managed to accomplish this after he met a bunch of other people who were close to him, and thus helped him in the process.

Willie learned from his newfound friends how to juggle his course work, his job, and his family. He had to put in place his priorities by bringing into perspective the question of what is more important, “Getting my education now or providing for my family.” His overall answer was prioritizing his family and his education. Willie did not want to be like other students who he encountered that did not complete their education as they did not stick it out. However, it was a great challenge for him working full time, going to school, and caring for his family, all at the same time.

In order to succeed, Willie adopted the mentality of resolve and ultimately telling himself that, “now no matter what, I am not going to fail.” He was very emphatic about it because he knew that one of his downfalls is a problem of not finishing projects. He had a bunch of unfinished projects at any given time. At one point, Willie promised himself that he is going to finish all these projects. One of those projects, was to complete his education. So, in 2013, he completed his associate degree at MCTC and is currently pursuing his bachelor’s degree at Metropolitan State University (Metro State).

According to Willie, the college played a major role while he was in the process of completing his associate degree. The administration was his biggest obstacle; literally, a bigger obstacle than he himself. The college administrative process worked against him. Lack of communication and misinformation from staff members caused Willie a lot of hardships and struggles, such as getting financial aid and registering for courses. All this came about because he was not being given proper information. However, three of his teachers took a liking of him, thus helping him navigate his way through. The instructors stepped in at a critical time and used whatever means they had to smoothen Willie's education path because it was a rough road. More often than not, it was rough for Willie. If it were not for those three specific people that gave him guidance, he might not have made it. It would have been definitely harder than it was for Willie were it not for the critical role the instructors played in his schoolwork success, as well as in navigating the administrative processes.

Willie's friends are still in college pursuing their educational aspirations. The dad of one his friends was involved in community education, especially in music, and helped local musicians find their way in that aspect. The involvement in the community by his friend's dad, motivated Willie to work hard so he may also emulate the good deeds by giving back to his community in the future.

One of the hardest courses Willie had to take was logic. He took the logic course in his final year at MCTC, and it was like "destroying my brain." It was actually a brother – a fellow student – who originally came from Liberia, who was in a computer science class that "kind of" saw that he had a tough time and offered to tutor him. They would meet up an hour before the class, and his student tutor friend would take his time from his busy day to meet with Willie

ahead of time. They would go over the class. Willie tributes his friend's intervention as the reason he passed his logic class.

Willie felt that the college offered support halfway and would require a lot of self-reliance by extending himself further beyond the college offering to be successful. The little knowledge he had about college was from his aunt, his mother's sister who was a college graduate. Other than his auntie, the other family member who he knew who had graduated from college, is his mom, who had a two-year college degree. By taking steps to get college education, Willie and his mom, kind of opened the door for the younger people behind him in his family to follow suit.

Willie remembered lessons from his mom, for example, of being self-reliant when faced by challenges. However, he also learned that in life, it is okay to ask for help when "I can't help myself." Willie also learned from one of the senior staffers at the time that, there are gatekeepers, people who have taken upon themselves to deter those who they feel should not be there and swing the door open for the people they think should be there. In closing, Willie had this to say:

> There is very much system in place to determine who will be successful and those who will not be successful. But as long as you have your own resolve, that what is it that you want to do, you know, you can go so far. Not every door may open up to you, but you don't have to fall prey to the condition that has been given to you. And there are a lot.

This resolve has kept Willie going towards his goal.

Max

There was not really one major factor that contributed to Max's graduation from college but for his perseverance and to keep showing up. That was his one main thing about his success. He had people who certainly helped him but that was the one main thing for him, and beside "to

keep showing up." He kept coming back to school, to his classes. He did not give up. He persevered. One thing that he learned was to listen to others, to the professors. He also read a lot of literature so he could learn and grow from what he learned, as well as sharing his learnings with other fellow students.

Max faced some financial challenges while he was undertaking his undergraduate program. However, the college did alleviate some of his financial aid need. He was awarded different scholarships towards his financial aid. He had Pell Grant federal aid. That was also a big part of funding for his undergraduate degree.

The instructors played some critical role when Max entered into his major. His advisors, the advising team, and the professors also played a significant role because without them, it would have been hard for him to be successful. His positive attitude also contributed to his success.

Max's family, who played the role of the community, was very supportive of him. They prayed for him, believed in him, and provided him with all the emotional support that he needed to go through college. On the other hand, his interactions with other students were on several forms. For example, he got a lot of help from other students, as well as undertook study sessions together. Max had a good rapport with his fellow students.

While pursuing his undergraduate degree program, Max remembers the college providing him with much-needed support, particularly with the social networks such as the Pan-African community, a network of African American students, and faculty support network. He received some great support that boosted his success as he knew very little about college success before joining. Max was in essence the first one in his family to go to college. He knew very little about college until he got there.

As Max knew very little about college, he handled the challenges he faced by not giving in, but by just persevering, and by being stubborn. He failed classes in his first years, but he kept coming back and not giving up. How he handled it, was by being stubborn and choosing not to quit.

When Max thinks of it now he realizes that he succeeded despite the structures and the system put in place. In some ways, systems have been designed for black kids not to succeed in college because the way the curriculum concept worked, it was not relevant to his cultural understanding. He had to learn things White people knew. Max concluded by saying that the one thing the college could have changed and could obviously still change is not to have the same expectations for all, and not to have systems that should have things be done only one supposedly right way. That is as far the biggest thing he thinks the college can do or change.

Joe

Joe did not know if one could really say that he faced challenges while in college because his life was built around two very simple sayings that he heard, probably from the day he could identify himself, and the sayings were, “I can’t and I quit.” They were not to be part of his vocabulary, and “failure was not an option.” So, he was never allowed to fail. It didn't matter therefore what was happening out there, they were never allowed to say that race or lack of money, or whatever cost him not to do this or that. It was just not accepted in his house, and when one was poor they were always told “you got to work twice as hard.” He could not answer that for anybody else because he was never allowed to even consider failure as an option. He was just never allowed, and was told that “excuses only satisfy the person that make them, and I don't want to hear them.” He heard these statements so many times, and so growing up with these experiences, he did not know anything else except to keep plugging away.

In order to meet his success requirements, Joe always had to have a goal and he always had to measure the goal. He had to have some kind of measuring stick, and everything was divided into pieces: one quarter, one half, three quarters, and a whole. So, if he was to go to college, the goal was a four-year degree. He had to complete the first year as there was no option, and he couldn't quit either. However, that did not mean that he had to complete the first year in one year because he still had other things to accomplish; for example, going to work as well as doing all the other stuff that needed his attention. But at some point, he had to ensure to check off that goal that he had made it through a quarter of the way toward his goal within that first year. Whenever he completed the quarter, the half, the three quarters, or the whole, he had to check them off along the way regardless of how long it took to meet his goal. That is how it was for Joe and his siblings to meet their successes.

Joe doesn't feel that he received any help from any of the schools that he attended in his undergraduate program. He attended schools in Indiana and attended Metro State as well. He doesn't think there was anybody or any part of the school that stepped up to do anything that he recalls, or considers as having helped or assisted him. It was all just him saying "this is what I got to do, so just go do it." But there was no support staff inside the college that helped or assisted him.

Joe doesn't think the instructors knew what to do with him or how to help him when he first started school. He hadn't been out of the service that long, and he was very opinionated because he didn't think he would live that long. Joe thought he would be dead before he got back home from the war. So, he didn't mind telling people what he thought. He didn't know if the instructors knew what to do with him, and by the time he got to Metro State to finish his last two years, he was a full-grown adult.

Joe doesn't recall ever having had a Black instructor; all of his instructors were White. Also, Joe doesn't mean to sound racist, but what could they tell him that would help him when he is struggling as a Black person, and what were they going to tell him to do? Nobody came to help him. He couldn't think of any instructor who really went out of their way or did anything that he would consider as help. He regrets that none of the instructors did anything that stands out in his head.

The community was not there for Joe as he could not find any role models. When he set out to do something, he had to deal with people saying to him, "well, you think you're better than us? Because you're different, you think you're smarter than us?" He would look around and there were hardly any people who looked like him. Joe would hang on to what he used to have or knew even though he had become a totally different person.

Joe did not interact much with other students because when he was finishing his last two years at Metro State, and he was working two jobs. He worked his regular job Monday through Friday, went to school at night, and worked his part time job on weekends. So, there was no opportunity for Joe to interact or create a bond with other students because his classes started at six in the evening, and they got out at nine at night. He had been up since five o'clock that morning. That would leave him ready to go to bed immediately after class. There was no time left to socialize.

Joe does not place all the blame or responsibility on the college for not providing anything to him because he is not even sure that he knew what he needed or would have appreciated at the time. He can't, therefore, say that the college did not provide any support. Maybe they provided support, and he just didn't know that resources existed. What would have been valuable to Joe now that he looks back over time is, if somebody had sat him down and

talked to him about enjoying life, instead of cramming ahead with everything. But that's 30 or 40 years of living, so he doesn't know if the school provided, failed to provide, or he failed to recognize that he needed something.

Joe knew nothing about college success before joining college. Absolutely nothing. To handle the challenges that came his way, he had to apply what he been taught as mentioned earlier, "I can't, and I quit, is not in my vocabulary, and failure is not an option." So, whatever popped up, he dealt with it and kept moving. That is the only thing that Joe knew.

In conclusion, Joe had the following ten things that he thinks if the college could have done or somebody at the college could have sat down and talk with people about, it would have helped him a lot:

1. If someone had sat down and talked to him about how to manage time and money.
2. If someone had talked to him about a support system, and he called that a mental health support system. Somebody that was a role model that he could look up to. Somebody that he could go to and say, "I am scared." Somebody that he could say to "I don't know how to deal with A, B, or C." So, a support system, mental health support system.
3. If someone was there to help as information system. There was a lack of information at the college.
4. If someone had talked to Joe about how to study. Or give him some tips on how to create a study plan.
5. If someone had talked to him about self-confidence.
6. If someone had talked to Joe about a fear of failure.
7. If someone had talked to him about a fear of success.
8. A fear of not being accepted by peers.

9. If someone had talked to Joe about not allowing other people to influence his emotions when they say, “well, you can’t do that, no black person has ever done that before.”
10. If somebody had talked to Joe about racism and say to him that “it is always going to be a part of life. So, so don't worry about it.”

If somebody had spent maybe a half hour talking to Joe about these 10 things, maybe it would have made life a little less painful, a little less lonesome. Because sometimes he felt like he was out there swimming in a big ocean all by himself, and he did not necessarily know what his next move would be. Joe reckoned that maybe these 10 things go together, maybe they won’t, maybe they don't, but decided to share them. Joe ended his interview with some words to the researcher and wishing the researcher success in his dissertation.

Fred

Fred was able to graduate with his associate degree because he is a firm believer in finishing what he starts. However, he had quite a large break in between the time he started and the time he finished due to personal issues such as employment, finances, and concentration factors. But the major issue was when dealing with his mother’s sickness or illness, which at the time she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Dealing with that and having to support her and his family made it hard for Fred to have time or room in his schedule. There was no room also for his academic plate at the time, so he took a break and went back to work.

As a student, Fred was “broke” all the time. But it reached a point where he needed to decide not to go back to school so he may save a little bit of money to get himself financially prepared. By getting himself financially situated, he would go back with less financial worry and stress that would otherwise overshadow his academic achievements. Those were the biggest factors that Fred faced while pursuing his associate degree. However, at one point in time, he

was pursuing both his associate and his bachelor's at the same time, which was just recently. Fred is now more focused on his bachelor's after graduating with his AS in Addiction Counselling. He should be graduating in the spring of 2022 with his bachelor's.

Fred attributes his success to "focusing, bringing the focus back" in completing his associate's degree, in continuing with school, and in working towards his bachelor's. He also allows himself to be a voice to be used in helping other people. He came to the realization that there are some people, including himself, that at one time or another didn't know the value of helping others. But now he has understood or learned that in the process of helping others, his serenity and his own peace are maintained. This has been a big factor in the way he does things now, and he helps other people by contributing to the things that he knows are of worthy cause, if not financially then with his time and support. Being a part of the community, staying active, and staying engaged have also contributed to Fred's staying focused.

There were three key individuals from college who played an instrumental part in Fred's success, by helping him with his personal struggles. They were there for him from day one when he was filling out his entrance exam paper, to his college application process, and continually being his big supporters. Additional support that Fred got was from the camaraderie of association with people just like him, meaning, people striving for the same cause; to further and advance themselves educationally, financially, mentally, as well as spiritually.

During his program, Fred's instructors did play a significant role in understanding his personal struggles, academic struggles and even in his day-to-day struggles. In addition, the entire staff that he dealt with on a day-to-day basis were also very understanding and very helpful. He found the structures put in place at both campuses, whether at MCTC or at Metro State, to be unique in how they dealt with students and their issues.

Fred was originally from Texas prior to coming to Minnesota. He had a lot of issues that he dealt with while he was there. Without shame, he testifies of his background and his past, of being a multiple offender, having been in and out of judicial and penal system throughout Texas, as well as being a recovering addict. Fred dealt with quite a bit in his transition to Minneapolis geographically, and was in hope of finding a better life. So, when he became rooted within the institute of education, there were people who understood his plight, as well as his struggles. Those people worked together in order to help Fred gain the confidence that he needed to reenter or reintegrate himself back into the mainstream of society, as well as leave the other life or the other world, and allow himself to progress and grow as a new individual person.

Fred's interaction with other students was in a mutually embraced approach. The people he dealt with reciprocated while nurturing or helping him or him helping them throughout the difficult times that he faced during his time at school. There were some students also, he remembers, specifically because they played a major role or major part of his day-to-day active environment. Fred also engaged himself in various organizations or groups, such as the Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB), that kept him busy and grounded in his campus life. He met and interacted with a lot of people through such campus organizations who also played a key or instrumental role in maintaining his focus. Helping others helped Fred stay focused.

Fred received financial aid and financial relief from the college which helped in his educational aspirations. The college also provided him with counseling, instruction, guidance, family, as well as a community where he was able to interact with other people. Fred can't say that the college had been "disingenuous" to him in any way at all and that he is just being real about it. In other words, he felt that if there were any shortcomings in their way, then he holds himself accountable and responsible for those, and for not living up to his full potential, or not

being acclimated, or not being completely focused on the things that he should have been, at those times. He could not say anything against them, but they helped him wherever they could, and whenever they could.

As Fred is actually more or less a first-generation college student, he knew very little about college or college success. When he joined MCTC, he had one brief college experience prior to that which was in his early twenties (he was either 19 or 20), which is over 20 plus years ago. Fred, in essence, came in not knowing what to expect. Fred handled the challenges that came his way by applying his beliefs as he stated:

> The only way to approach any kind of issue, any kind of challenges is head up. You know, head on. And not trying to deviate or sidetrack or sidestep the issue, just to deal with this straight up. I was brought up that way, I was raised that way.
>
> And so generally that's the way I approach our schools or approach challenges, head up you know, whatever it is you either want to be on top of it or I am not, usually I am striving to be on top of it.

In conclusion, Fred says that his experience with the college could not have been any better than what it already had been. And he attributes his success to the faculty, the staff, and the students with whom he interacted. He also commends the faculty and staff for taking on a heavy load in dealing with students from all walks of life, from various ethnic cultures and different beliefs and perspectives, and not being discriminatory about it but being more of a mentorship type situation. Fred could not think of anything else they could have done to smooth his road for his educational travels than what they did or are doing.

Fred had some words for the researcher as well, “just keep doing what you're doing man, you have a lot of people looking up to you, and counting on you, myself included. And, just you know, continue to set trends as you're doing now, and just stay focused.”

Rich

Rich has always wanted to pursue his education. But his lifestyle and his drug addiction, held him back from pursuing that. He knew that would not be possible until he dealt with the drug addiction and the lifestyle. In 2004, he went to a treatment facility to deal with the drug addiction. He also had many other barriers at the time. He had a criminal past and he tried to figure out by asking himself, “Even if I went back to school, who would hire me when I got a degree and with a criminal past?”

Another barrier Rich had was child support. He owed $800.00 a month in child support. So, he also tried to figure out how he was going to be able to pay that and to go to school. He petitioned the Court for a suspension of his child support while he was in school and was adamantly denied. They didn’t even want to hear what he had to say. They told him that either he better pay his child support, or he was going to go to jail, which was very disappointing and almost cost him to not move forward. Rich just thought that the system was stuck against him. Here he was, trying to better himself and they won’t even consider his request. He understands that people play the system. To him reasonably, if he made more money he would be paying more to the system, he would be paying more taxes, he would be a more productive member of the society, and he would be supporting his children. So, he doesn’t see how that could be a bad thing. To Rich, a reasonable response from the Court would have been:

> I will tell you what? I want to see you after the first semester with your official grades, and if you do what you say you plan to do, then we will continue to suspend it till you

graduate, and I want to see you each semester. They didn't do that, they just said, "No, you pay it, or you go to jail." That's it!

That almost discouraged Rich from going forward, but he was determined. He had one job at the time, and he just moved forward with applying to college thinking that "You know, that God, I am a God-fearing man, that God will make a way." Rich believed that this was God's will for him, and so He would make a way, and sure enough God did.

Rich had one job before starting school, and when he started school, he got another job, and then another job. So, Rich had three jobs while he was pursuing his education full time, which was 12 credits. And so, it wasn't easy for Rich. He was still new in his recovery, and also still trying to deal with finding himself, who he was. Addiction "kinda takes a toll on you, with identity, like who you are." So, it was like finding himself all over again, in addition to working three jobs, and going to school full time. It wasn't easy for Rich.

The first thing that Rich did to succeed, was to be committed. He had to make a commitment to himself and to his goals. He considers commitment as the first thing. He made up in his mind that nothing was going to stop him from completing what he had started off to do. The second thing was the job he got within the school, the student employee position. Even though he had a criminal background, Public Safety still hired him. And so, the student employee position connected Rich to finances which was key because it removed that financial barrier for him. And also, it made him feel more of a part of the community. He got to know the school, the resources, the people, and that made him be more invested in his education, not only in his education but also in the community at large. And so that was a key to his success.

And then on top of that, the student employee position allowed Rich to do homework while he was working, which was huge because working three jobs and carrying a full course load, “you don’t have a lot of time to be able to do study while you are working, which is huge.” While working at the college, Rich found out about resources in the school that connected him to scholarships, which he probably would not have known about if he was coming and leaving every day. He got two of the top scholarships at the time, Kopp presidential scholarships which was $2500.00 a year, $1250 a semester.

Rich says that the college played a significant role in alleviating his financial burden as he mentioned earlier. In addition, Rich thinks though indirectly, that the college helped in lessening the criminal barrier because the Public Safety hired him with a criminal past thus giving him hope, “that you know, people do give you second chances.” And so that played a huge, huge role for Rich. Also, just being a part of the team that works in the college, enabled him to meet so many faculty and staff members that he interacted with, and not only did they give him advice, but they also mentored him along. And if people didn’t see him every day, they would wonder where he was. Not like as if he was caught in a community that doesn’t care whether he is there or not. If they didn’t see him, they tended to find out, “where is Rich?”

A bad experience that Rich had with an instructor is when the instructor asked the class to write an assignment on, “an experience you had.” He wrote about his experience which was helping an individual who was going through some difficult moments and indicated in his writing that God had placed him or put him there at that moment in order to assist the individual. The instructor said to Rich, “I am not buying the whole God thing.” And then Rich was like:

> Wait a minute, that is not for you to buy! You asked me to write about my experience. So how can you tell me what my experience is and what you believe my experience to be?

> Wasn't the assignment to write about my experience? Well, that was my experience. And so, he, my grade was less because of, I wrote about that. I was just like "whatever." I thought about filing a complaint, I thought whatever. I got a "B," I would be fine. That was a negative experience.

Rich noticed that around the campus there was a very liberal attitude, and even though they claimed that they want to be inclusive to everyone, that did not always include people who believed in God. However, there were some people who also believed in God and so he connected with those people and that community, and that helped. A lot of the instructors were patient, and instead of just giving him a poor grade, they first explained why, and how to fix it and so that helped him to grow throughout his academic career. He kind of grew in his writing skills and his other skills that were lacking before he started school, and that definitely helped with his success.

Rich remembers Minneapolis College as a very close-knit community, like being at home, where everyone knows everyone's name, and that also played a huge role in his success as he felt like being part of a family. He had a group of students that "we kinda stuck together, took notes and talked together through the challenges they faced." He also exchanged resources with his group of friends to overcome some of the barriers and challenges that they faced. And when they didn't have resource themselves, they would reach out to a staff faculty member who might be able to help. Rich stuck around people who were likeminded, for example, those who had committed to accomplish their academic career. It also helped Rich to be around people who were highly motivated to succeed, as it boosted his morale. He also had people that he helped and so when "you are helping others to succeed as well, then that kinda helps you in return."

Because Rich was highly motivated, he sorted things out to promote his success and so, there were various resources available at the college including tutors, help from instructors after class time, open office hours to ask questions and to get clarification on things. He heard from other students that if one is not "highly motivated," there can be some barriers to learning for example, things like how to effectively use the D2L Brightspace tool. Students can also get lost when there is no accountability with assignments because once one gets to the college level, there is no one to say "hey, where is your assignment?" And so, Rich encountered some students that procrastinated, got behind, and did not recover.

Rich acknowledges that at the college level, there isn't a lot of accountability for one's performance. However, he thinks that Minneapolis College is unique and different due to the fact that their clients or their students are not the traditional students that they should be just because they serve a client base that has a lot of barriers and may not have the experience or the tools or skills for success. One of the things that Rich learned when he started was a study skills class that was not part of his required curriculum to graduate. But he thought, after not being in school for so long, he had to take a quick course he needed to succeed, and it did help him with things like time management and "kinda" what to expect back and how to navigate certain things, and how to ask the right questions. And the study skills, Rich reckons, was a key to his success. He recommends that something like that should be required, where it incorporates not only study skills and time management, but also computer skills. He encountered students who lacked basic computer skills, and so a basic course for students that lack some of those skills should be required. Rich recommends also that some type of assessment tool that should be put in place that could be used in identifying students in need of study skills.

Rich did not know anything about college success before joining college. One thing he did know from high school is that "you had to be proactive, you had to stay on top of things." His experience from high school was, that each skill was built upon another and so, if one is not diligent in their classes, or they are barely getting by, then when they move to the next level more is expected. And as the skills rise, if one is not putting their maximum effort, they could get lost in the shuffle and get behind and be lost, and not know what the expectation is. Therefore, they will not do well. And so, Rich didn't know a lot, but he knew that he had to be present, he had to be there. He knew that he had to do the work. He knew that he had to ask questions, that there was no such thing as a stupid question "if you didn't know, you better ask somebody," because probably ten other people in that class are wondering the same question. But yes, he didn't understand a lot, he "kinda figured" things out on his own as he went along and asked a lot of questions.

As Rich had committed in his mind to come to college, he considered setbacks just as a part of the building process. He imagined that when one is constructing a building, they are "gonna" have problems with supplies, equipment, and things like that. Rich equated school to be the same way. He can remember being so tired from working three jobs, doing homework, and from school that, every so often his body would say enough. And he would sleep for two days straight, not on purpose. He would literally, just go to sleep and not wake up for two days. And when he went to sleep, that was the only time he had to sleep, so he would shut his phone off, so people won't wake him up. Sleeping for two days straight made Rich miss classes, miss work, got his car towed as he used to park in an area where he would normally wake and go to school, hence moving it. And so, those were his setbacks. But Rich was motivated by the fact that he was getting good grades, he was getting all "A's and B's" and he was on the Dean's List every

semester, or “Honor Roll” or “whatever you call it.” Rich knew that he could do it, and so the need for him to keep pushing forward.

Rich feels that the college could have made the orientation process better. He reckons that there were a lot of resources and things on campus that he was not made aware of, but because he worked there, he found them. The average person Rich observes, wouldn’t know unless they ask about them or ask a lot of questions. However, he was “gonna” succeed regardless. Even if the college could have done nothing, he would still have succeeded. That’s how determined Rich was. He also believes that the college could do a better role in identifying people who have barriers to their education, by having some type of assessment tool to identify those people and then have a support system ready to implement their academic career at college as well as support them. He noted that the college does have a lot of wonderful support, a student support center with counseling services, as well as help with food and housing.

Having worked as a student worker within the college, Rich concluded with the following observations: (a) Some barriers he thought, come about by the college holding some people’s hands too much; (b) The college could do a better job with empowering people to equip them to be independent to their academic career; (c) He thought college doesn’t have enough accountability for those who are not serious about being in college; (d) Rich felt that it is not the college’s fault, but it is the policy, and so, he thinks that the urgent people who doesn’t have the skill, especially those with mental health, need to be assisted otherwise they “are not gonna succeed or they would be disruptive to other people;” (e) Rich believes however, that the college does a good job with what they got, as it is tough to satisfy all the people, since they all are in so many different stations of life; (f) He also observes that MCTC is not a traditional college, as it welcomes people who are brand new eighteen-year old’s coming straight from high school as

well people who are 60-70 years old; and bn (g) Rich reckons that the college does a good job with what they have but thinks there is always areas that need some improvement. Sometimes he feels that the college gets too caught up with what is “politically” correct, and not doing what is best for the students.

Leon

It took Leon 30 years for him to complete his degree and he was relating his situation to a student whom he had helped just before the interview session. The student was enlightened and excited as she was going to graduate this spring semester after being in school for 30 years. And so, he told her, “I understand your joy.” Leon says that his family is what made him graduate from college. To him, family is mom and dad, aunt and uncle, and neighbors. Those were the people that pushed him towards applying and going to college, as well as his teachers in high school. They too pushed him to do this. His church members also assisted him as well and encouraged him to go as well.

Leon had to bring in some changes into his attitude from his younger to his older years when going back to school. In his older years, Leon had kids. Both Leon and his wife valued education and had the responsibility of showing their kids the importance of education. Also, in his older years, Leon wanted to advance in his career and this he could do by advancing his education and graduating from college.

To succeed in his studies, Leon had to change his study habits. He was determined to be successful. He reiterated, “I changed my attitude.” In other words, he was not 16/17 years old. He was then 19/20/21 years old, and there's a difference in those two ages, as far as he’s concerned. His family, his attitude, and then also getting to know himself, which he felt to be very important as far as succeeding is concerned. Sometimes Leon would see work and he

imagines himself incapable of carry out the tasks or at times he does not put much effort into it, yet he has the capacity to do it. That's why he’s talking about knowing himself being responsible and also, changing his personal attitude in reference to accomplishing this particular role.

The college did play some significant role in alleviating the challenges Leon faced. The instructors motivated him and others. He said that they challenged them in more than one way, in reference to working in class, or relating with them outside of class, or being just stopping in for an event or an activity that was going on on campus as well as just caring. But what went wrong as Leon observed was when growing up or getting older. He noticed that the instructors allowed one to self-destruct in that, if one wants the education that's being offered to him, then they would there to help him. But in the long run, if he doesn’t want it, they were not going to give it to him, they were not going to hold his hand, and they were not going to feed him. But if he wants it, then he will have to do and learn those things himself, and in the long run he will see the benefits of what quality education can do.

Leon is not originally from Minnesota and “I’m not gonna say I’m still a visitor of Minnesota,” but he had a few relatives here. But really, people in the community in a sense took care of him based off their children attending the same school as he did. He interacted with them during his visits to their homes and their churches. They supported Leon, they would invite him over for dinners and family events, they would always give him words of encouragement, and they talked to him about the importance of completing his degree or completing his education.

Looking around the classroom and sometimes being the only person of color in the class, it was a challenge sometimes for Leon to have a meaningful interaction with other students.

Until and when he was able to develop a relationship with others in the class, was he able to obtain assistance from others when faced by challenges. And not only was he looking at it as an assignment that Leon and his other one or two fellow students were required to get together and accomplish as a group, but he was also looking to develop a relationship that goes beyond the classroom. He attempted to work with other students in a class or classes that he was part of as well as attending different events with them. However, it was a challenge for Leon because when he looked around the class, there was only one or two other people of color, and that was a real challenge “within itself.”

Leon came from a poor high school. His high school was predominantly Black. In his first two years of high school, there was a mixture of all races and then the city opened up two more high schools so by the time he graduated, there was probably 99% African American and 1% probably other. And he doesn’t know what that other might have been, but it was probably just 1%. When he came to Minnesota to go to school, he was kind of looking for the same thing and that just wasn't there. He would have gone to an HBC or historically black college, and that would have been the difference of being here. But at the same time, Leon acknowledges that the support was here, such as the Black Student Union, academic advising, and mentoring. He also went to the library, and the Librarians were very supportive.

Leon was for sure not prepared for college success before joining school. And because it was different for him, he feels that he should have probably started out at a community college, which he recommends. But at the same time, he acknowledges that it is a different experience in which one is exposed to as far as education is concerned. He was exposed to education at a different level when he came to Minnesota to go to school, and at the time he did not understand this. He did well in his classes though, but he didn’t do as well as he should have.

In handling the challenges that came his way, Leon remembers when he was 17/18 years old just like all the other traditional students. And at 17/18 years old, when he was on his own, he grew up mighty fast, at least that's the way he's looking at. And he always tells himself and he tells his kids, and he tells his grandkids this:

> No one's going to tell you, when to wake up. No one's going to tell you to put on your clothes, no one's going to tell you it's time for you to go to class and no one's going to tell you, when to study and when you have to do your homework.

So, those were challenges right there that as a young person for which he had to become responsible. However, he had a couple of guys with whom he went to school. He's just going to call them his mentors because they were and what they basically did was to show him or teach him the ropes if he wanted or was willing to learn them. They guided him by saying:

> We're going to study hall, we're going to study for two hours, after that two hours, we're gonna go get our dinner and do whatever else we want to do after that, but for sure we're going to go study and not play around.

Leon cherished such moments with his mentors.

In his conclusion, Leon observed that the college could have done more advertisement or outreach, and this could have made his educational journey smoother. He reckons that the college could have advertised more but for students, the kind of what they do here at Metro State. For example, in promoting for student's involvement in student organizations, for students to get involved in professional organizations, to find a mentor, to talk to the instructors, and to use the study lab. Those are the things that Leon is concerned about and he is thinking from a different mindset now because he is not an 18-year-old right now. Leon concluded with the following comment:

I'm the person that went to school to get the education. The school provided me with the areas or the rooms, or the buildings for me to go to get an education, so I believe I can't blame anything or anyone, except for myself.

Part II: Analysis of the Findings

Part I of Chapter 4 exhibited the rich narratives of the six participants. Part II of Chapter 4 will bring forth barriers and themes of persistence that the six participants encountered on their educational journeys. Common themes amongst the participants evolved though each had unique life experiences. A table of the themes and factors is represented in Appendix D.

Barrier Themes

All through the interviews, common barriers emerged. When identifying barriers from the participants' narratives, several themes emerged with contributing subcategories. Most participants offered several barriers to explore.

Lack of support

Popular barriers amongst the participants were the lack of support they received during their academic careers. Whether it was in the form of not enough financial resources or campus support services for African American male students, students felt the lack of support impacted their experience. Participants mentioned the lack of people, more specifically, role models, advisors, and friends guiding them through the process.

Financial. Financial stress was a factor that impacted the prospects and slowed participants' pursuit of earning a degree. Willie admitted that, "I was homeless though I had a job." He added, "I had to figure out, getting education or providing for my family." Willie had a daughter of whom he had to care for all by himself and had to find a way of getting financial support to meet his obligations.

For Fred, the lack of funding determined when he was going to get back to school and pursue his education. “I was broke all the time.” To have funds for his schooling, Fred said, “I was like well, no need to go back now, let me save a little bit of money, get myself financially prepared to go back to school.” It took Fred longer to graduate as he had to take a break to go back to work so he could get funds for his schooling as well as for supporting his family.

Joe on the other hand said, “I don’t think there was anybody or any part of the school that stepped up to do anything that I recall, or I would consider that helped or assisted me.” To fund his education, Joe said, “I worked my regular job Monday through Friday, and my part time job on the weekend.”

Rich, too, had financial troubles. He said, “So, I had one job, and I started school. And got another job, and then another job. So, I had three jobs while I was pursuing my education full time that was 12 credits.” He owed $800.00 a month of child support and he had to figure out how he was going to pay for it and how to pay for his education, hence the three jobs he had.

Campus. The campus community and climate can impact the overall experiences of students. Unfortunately, for some participants, campus was not a place where they felt supported or connected. Willie stated, “College was an obstacle. Misinformation by staff caused hardship in getting financial aid, registration of courses.” Joe said, “There was no support staff inside the college that helped me.” On Rich’s part, he had this to say:

> I think the orientation process could have been better. I think there were a lot of resources and things on campus that I was not made aware of. The college could do a better role in identifying people who have barriers in education.

On the other hand, in regard to the instructors Leon said, “They allow you to self-destruct. So, if you don’t want the education that’s been offered to you, we’re not going to give it to you. We are

not going to hold your hand. We are not going to feed you." Whether the campus provided support services or not, most of the participants did not utilize and make those connections.

People. The scarcity of role models, advisors, and friends also played a part in the educational experience of the participants. While many participants discussed the positive impact of role models, Willie had no one who encouraged him to pursue his education. He stated, "I had nobody to help me figure out what is what. No guidance, nobody, I ended up dropping out." Joe along the same lines said, "I don't think I ever had somebody that was a role model that I could look up to." He revealed that there was lack of somebody that, "I could go to and say, I am scared, I don't know how to deal with A, B, or C." If somebody had spent a half hour talking to Joe, maybe his educational journey would have been "a little less painful, a little less lonesome." Joe also experienced "a fear of not being accepted by peers."

Lack of cultural competency.

The lack of cultural competency struck a chord with the participants in the study. Students experienced this unpreparedness within the campus community from students, faculty, and staff. Max said, "because the way the curriculum worked, it is not relevant to my cultural understanding." He further stated, "there was same expectations for everyone from systems that required things be done only one right way." The same sentiments were echoed by Rich when he said, "I noticed around the campus that there was a very liberal attitude even though they claim that they want to be inclusive to everyone, that did not include people who believe in God." Rich experienced this with one of the instructors as he narrates in his own words:

> A bad experience that I had with an instructor is when the instructor asked us to write an assignment on an "experience you had." I wrote my experience which was helping an individual going through some difficult moment. And I indicated in my writing that God

placed me there at that moment in order to assist the individual. So, he said I am not buying the whole God thing.

Rich got a "B" in the class because of that, and he had thought of filing a complaint but he was just like "whatever."

Joe, on his part, said that "all my instructors were White," and he was in the opinion that they were not competent enough to tell him anything related to cultural awareness. Similarly, Leon affirmed the same sentiments as Joe in that, "looking around the classroom and sometimes you are the only person of color in the class" makes it hard to relate with fellow students. Leon added that working together in a group assignment, "it is a challenge until you are able to develop a relationship with others in the class." The people these students came in contact with demonstrated a lack of cultural awareness and that was a definite barrier for the participants.

Diversity/Racism. Max coped with issues of racism and lack of diversity within the college based on his experience. Max said, "I think college was not designed for Black kids to succeed in college." He added that, "I had to learn things White people know," hence making it harder for him to be on the same pace of learning with other students. By the same token, Joe wished that, "if somebody had talked to me about racism" as it would have been of great help to him, "when people say, well, you can't do that, no Black person has ever done that before." "I don't think I ever had a Black instructor," Joe stated. Leon faced a similar experience. He said, "it's a challenge because when you look at it as I said, there's only one or two other people of color in the class with you" and "so that's a challenge within itself." Participants noted the lack of diversity they encountered through their educational journey and how that experience affected them.

Lack of Identity

Lack of identity emerged as a barrier for the participants. They had experiences where they fought to feel accepted and to feel like they belonged. Several participants questioned if they were smart enough to be there and struggled with finding themselves.

Lack of Belonging. Participants dealt with cultural issues on top of suffering from a lack of belonging. Willie learned from one of the senior staffers at the college that there are gatekeepers stationed to deter those whom they feel should not be there and swing the door open for the people they think should be there. However, Willie said, “not every door may open up to you, but you don’t have to fall prey to the condition that has been given to you. And there are a lot.” Joe on the other hand, felt alone as he revealed, “because sometimes I felt like I was out there swimming in a big ocean all by myself and I did not necessarily know what my next move would be.” Based on the challenges Rich faced before coming back to school, his return felt “like finding myself all over again.” Due to the institutions’ lack of diversity and the participants’ lack of belonging, the researcher recognized lack of identity as a barrier.

Personal Issues

Participants were asked if they faced any challenges while pursuing their degree. At some point in every participants’ life and educational journey, they encountered various challenges including personal issues that interrupted or slowed their quest for higher education. Personal issues came in the form of homelessness, depression and anxiety, child support, criminal background, recovering addict, and sickness.

Homelessness. Homelessness was one of the main personal issues that Willie faced as he started college. Though Willie was in employment, “I was homeless.” Being homeless made it

difficult for Willie to carry on with his education effectively, considering the fact that he also had a daughter to raise.

Depression/anxiety. Depression and anxiety played a huge role in Joe's education journey as he said that he did not have "somebody I could go to and say I am scared." Though Joe was committed to succeed in his aspirations despite the challenges he faced, he still wished "if someone had talked to me about not allowing other people to influence my emotions." Joe also wished, "if someone had talked to me about self-confidence" as this would have made his education journey less stressful than it was.

Child Support. One of the personal issues that Rich faced when he was returning to school, was child support. He owed $800.00 monthly for the child support and he had to come up with ways and means of sorting out the payment. Rich approached the Court as he said,

> I petitioned the court for a suspension of my child support while in school. The petition was adamantly denied. They told me that either I better pay my child support, or I was going to go to jail. I just thought the system is stuck against me.

The denial by the court to suspend his child support while in school, nearly derailed Rich's education journey. Because he believed in God, he decided to trust God for strength as he got himself three jobs, as well as attending school full time.

Criminal Background. Some of the participants had criminal backgrounds. On his criminal background, Fred said, "I say this without shame but as a testimony about my background and my past. Being a multiple offender in and out of Judicial penal system." He was assisted by his instructors and staff members at the college in getting back to the mainstream of the society.

Rich on the other hand said, “I had a criminal past,” and wondered, “even if I went back to school who would hire me when I get a degree and with a criminal past?” Rich was offered employment by the Public Safety department as a student employee despite his criminal past.

Recovering Addict. Fred had a criminal background as mentioned earlier, “as well as being a recovering addict.” He had support from his instructors and other individuals from the college as he worked on his addiction recovery. Rich was also a recovering addict. In regard to his addiction, Rich said:

> But my lifestyle and drug addiction held me back, until I dwelt with the drug addiction. I went to a treatment facility to deal with the drug addiction. Addiction kinda takes a toll on you, with identity, like ‘who you are.’

Rich’s drug addiction slowed his educational experience.

Sickness. Fred had to temporarily stop his learning as his mother became sick. He had to go back to work to support his mother and family. Fred said, “when it came to my mother and her sickness or illness,” who “at that time being diagnosed with terminal cancer” he had to pause his academic journey so assist his family.

Life happened to these students, and it played a role in their path to degree completion.

Navigating College

Navigating college, such as trying to apply for financial aid, lack of information, or having a very little understanding of the college environment such as finding a mentor, was difficult for the participants in the study. Max knew very little about college success. Max said, “I knew nothing about college until I got there.” Joe noted “lack of information” as one of the things he experienced while navigating college. He said, “I am not even sure I knew what I needed or what I would have appreciated it at the time.” Like Max, Fred said, “I knew very little

about college" because, "I am actually more or less a first-generation college student." Rich knew he had to be there as he did not know much. He said, "I didn't know a lot, but I knew you have to be present; you have to be here." Rich further said, "But, yes, I didn't have a lot. I kinda figured things out as I went a long." On Leon's part, had he known the college's environment, it would have helped him to "find a mentor" easily as well as "to talk to the instructors and use the study lab." There is no GPS on how to navigate college and this was an issue for participants.

Time Poverty

The term time poverty exemplifies the extreme lack of time these students felt when going to school. Areas noted from the interviews included time taken to go to work to support family and not having enough time to get involved in the campus experience. Time poverty was real for several of the participants who struggled to balance everything on their full plate.

Family. Fred was helping his family while in school and this was hard for him as he could not concentrate well in his studies as well as raise funds enough to support his family. Fred, therefore said, "I took a break and went back to work" in support of the family.

Involvement on Campus. Joe did not have time to socialize with other students. Joe said, "I was working two jobs" and that, "I went to school at night, so there was no opportunity to interact" or "create a bond with other students."

Commitments

A very common theme among the participants was the numerous commitments each participant had outside of school. This theme tag teamed time poverty as the participants had more time poverty as their commitments increased. Several participants, at some point in their educational journey, had children, family, or jobs to care for. During Willie's first attempt of college, he dropped out of school for a period of time because of his daughter. He said, "I made

my first attempt at college in 1993, the year my daughter was born and found myself going to raise her by all myself." When his daughter was older, he did return to school to finish his associate's degree. Apart from going to school, Fred had a family to support. Fred said, "Having to support the family, there was not just enough time in my schedule on my plate for academics at the moment." On the other hand, Rich faced child support requirements as well as lack of finances for college. He said, "I owed $800.00 a month in child support," and "So, trying to figure out how I was going to be able to pay that and to go school" was challenging. To pay for the child support and for his classes, Rich got himself several jobs. Rich said, "I can remember being so tired from working three jobs," that "every so often, my body would say enough." He further said, "I would just go to sleep and not wake up for two days; I would miss classes, and I would miss work. It wasn't easy." While commitments altered the participants' journey, it did not stop them.

Academic Preparedness

A majority of the participants in the study felt that they were not prepared for college as well as finding the coursework to be hard. Most of them joined college with no knowledge of what to expect or with little understanding.

Not ready for college. Willie joined college with minimal understanding. He said he had, "no experience whatsoever," and "it was very hard the whole time" for him while in school. Joe said there was no one to "give me some kind of tips on how to create a study plan." While Rich on the other hand, concurred that "the college could do a better job with empowering people to equip them to be independent to their career." Leon concurred with the other participants, "that I was not prepared" for college.

Coursework. Apart from being unprepared for college, Willie also faced challenges in one of his courses. He said, “one of the hardest courses I had to take is logic. That kind of saw that I had a tough time.” Max also faced challenges in his initial years of college. He said, “I failed classes in my first years.” On his part Leon said, “I was exposed to education at a different level when I came to Minnesota to go to school” as “I understood that later on, but at the time, I did not.” Despite the many obstacles encountered by the participants, they still kept going.

Themes of Persistence

This study interviewed participants at varying stages of their educational journey. It is important to note that though participants identified barriers to their academic journeys, themes of persistence were also acknowledged. With several subcategories named, the overarching themes of persistence were support, role models, achievement, and internal motivation. Since the road to degree completion is winding for many African American male students, it is important to understand persistence factors.

Support

For the participants, evidence of support in various forms allowed for these students to persevere and complete their degrees.

Family. Willie’s mom and his auntie supported and encouraged him throughout his undergraduate career. Willie said, one of the “Lessons from my mother and auntie” that I learnt was “being self-reliant and to seek for help if I can’t help myself.” Max received unequivocal support from his family. Max said the following about his family, “they have been very supportive of me. Praying for me, believing in me, giving me emotional support.” Joe adhered to the strong words of advice from his family. Joe said, “when you are poor, we were always told,

you got to work twice as hard. You always had to have a goal and you always had to measure." Family provided the necessary support for the participants in different ways.

Financial. Finances were a major barrier for most participants. However, access to financial assistance offered an opportunity for participants to complete their degrees. In undergraduate school, Max said as for the, "Financial aid in my undergraduate, I had Pell Grant Federal Aid. I was awarded different scholarships. That was also a part of a big funding for my undergraduate degree." Fred also did receive some financial help. He said, "they provided financial aid financial relief" and that helped him a lot as he had a family to support as well. Working in the position of a student employee, provided Rich with financial opportunities. Rich said, "that connected me to finances which was key because it removed that financial barrier for me." He added, "I found out about resources in the school and that connected me to scholarships. I got two top scholarships at the time."

Community. The participation in the community by his friend's dad motivated Willie to work hard so he may also give back to his community in the future once he is done with his schooling. Willie said, "a dad of a friend was involved in community education, especially in music, and helped local musicians find their way in that aspect." When asked about how did the community help you succeed in your college life? Fred said, "There were people who understood my plight as well as my struggle. Those people worked together to help me to reenter or reintegrate myself back into the mainstream of society." Rich agreed that community can help students reach their goals. He said, "Minneapolis College was like home, and then also, it made me feel be part of the community. I got to know the school resources, the people. I was more invested in my education," and "not only in my education, but also in the community at large." Leon said, "people in the community are to a sense took care of me based of their children

attending the same school that I did," as well as "going and visiting their homes, and their churches." He added, "they supported us, they would always give us words of encouragement," and "talked to us on the importance of completing our degree/education." Community support and engagement played a major role in motivating students attain their academic aspirations.

Campus Support Services. Participants spoke about the lack of services and not getting involved on campus as a barrier. However, participants who utilized those campus services acknowledged the importance of making a connection and getting involved. Max had positive words in regard to campus support services. He stated, "with all the social network, Pan African Community, network of African American students, and faculty network support, they gave me some great support." Fred's involvement with on campus groups was also of great benefit to his success. Fred said, "one of the groups I was actually involved in with was African American Brotherhood (SAAB), that kept me grounded for a while." He added, "they provided counseling, they provided instructions, they provided guidance, they provided community, they provided family." Fred continued to say, "the structures put in place in both campuses," were very helpful." Rich too had great words for campus support services as it helped him a lot when he joined college. Rich said, "one of the jobs I got was within the school. So, student employee position, even though I had a criminal background, Public Safety still hired me." He added, "the student employee position allowed me to do homework while I was working. Which was huge because working three jobs and carrying a full course load, you don't have a lot of time to be able to study." Leon too, acknowledged benefiting from on campus support services. He said, "the support was here, such as the Black Student Union as well as academic advising." Leon added, "we had mentoring, and the librarians were very supportive."

Faculty/Advisors. A majority of the participants stressed the importance of their advisors at some point in the academic career. Willie attributed his success to his instructors. He said, "instructors helped navigate the way through," as they "smoothed the way -- gave guidance -- otherwise I would not have made it." They helped him also "navigate administrative process and was successful." Max on his part said, "my advisors and the people who were advising, significantly played a role because without them, it would have been hard to be successful." Fred concurred:

> There were key individuals, when it came to my personal struggles that played an instrumental part in my success. The entire staff that I dealt with were pretty understanding when it came to my personal struggles or my academic struggles or my day-to-day struggles.

Rich said, "you meet so many staff faculty in college, and staff that you talk to that give you advice, and mentor you along. If they don't see you, they tend to find out; 'where is Rich?" Likewise, Leon was grateful for his instructors who encouraged and motivated him. He said, "I like to say they motivated me and others. They challenged us in more than one way, in reference to working in class. Or relating with us outside the class, on campus as well as just caring."

Friends. Support came from friends for the participants as well. Willie said, "I took a logic course in my last year at Minneapolis College and it was like destroying my brain." He added:

> And a brother originally from Liberia, that was in a computer class tutored me. I tribute his intervention to me being able to pass my logic class. I met a bunch of other people, who were close to me and helped me in the process.

As for Max, not only did he learn from his fellow students, but he also shared with them what he had learned. Max said, “one thing I learned is listening to others, and sharing with other students.” Fred also had fellow students who supported him in his academic journey. He said, “there were some students who I remember because, they played a major role or major part of my day-to-day active environment.” Fred also assisted his fellow students as it helped him keep his serenity. Fred said, “as far as maintaining your serenity or your own peace in the process, I allow myself to be a voice in helping other people.” Likewise, Rich had a group of fellow students who did things together. Rich said:

> I had a group of students, that we “kinda” stuck together. We took notes together. Exchanged resources to overcome some of the barriers and challenges we faced. I also had people that I helped. And so, when you are helping others to succeed as well, then that kinda helps you in return.

Leon too, received support from his college friends. Leon stated:

> I had a couple of guys that went to school with me. I’m just going to call them my mentors because they were. What they basically did was they show, or they taught you the ropes, if you wanted to learn with them.

Support was the most prominent theme of persistence found in the study.

Role Models

A theme of persistence that became clear throughout the interviews was the importance of having a role model. Family, friends, and faculty/instructors played this crucial role in helping participants in their educational journey. Fortunately, most participants had that person or persons who set an example and served as role models.

Willie had only his mom and auntie as close family to have graduated from college. Willie said, “One family member on my mother’s side, Auntie R. was a college graduate. Other than Auntie R., my mom went to school and got a two-year degree.” On the other hand, Joe was guided by guidelines provided by his family. Joe said, “it didn’t matter what was happening out there, we were never allowed in my house to say race or lack of money or whatever, cost me not to do that.” Leon asserted that his family played a role in his college graduation. Leon said, “what made me graduate from college was basically my family. Mom and dad, that’s family. Aunt and uncle, that’s family.” As for Fred, he had this to say about the researcher as one of his role models, “I just say, just keep doing what you’re doing (addressing the researcher), you have a lot of people looking up to you. You have a lot of people counting on you, myself included.”

Apart from having family as role models, the participants also expressed the important function instructors played as role models. Willie said, “most instructors played a critical role, helped us” and “being able to give information that would be the key to being successful in school.” Max echoed similar sentiments as Willie that, “the professors playing a great role as well” in their position as role models. Fred said:

> I attribute that to the faculty and staff because they take on a heavy load dealing with students from all walks of life, in various ethnic cultures and different believes and perspectives. And not being discriminatory but being more of a mentorship situation.

Rich on his part summed it thus, “a lot of these instructors were patient. Instead of just giving you a poor grade, they explained why and how to fix it. That definitely helped with my success.” Role models set important examples of perseverance for the participants and inspired them to push forward towards earning their degrees.

Achievement

Degree completion, opportunities to advance professionally and making family proud, influenced the participants in the study to surpass the previously mentioned barriers.

Degree Completion/Advance Professionally. Participants mentioned their desires to attain their degrees as well as advance in their career aspirations. Willie said, “So in 2013, I completed my associate degree at Minneapolis College,” and “I am now pursuing my bachelor’s degree at Metro State.” Max on his part explained on how he went about attaining his academic goals. He said, “how I handled it, is by being stubborn, choosing not to quit,” and by “reading literature, to learn and grow from what I was reading.” Joe on the other hand, applied principles he learned from his family to obtain his degree. Joe stated what his family taught him, “It was goal setting and then, no matter how long it took, you had to check off those goals until you got to the end.” Fred said, “I graduated with my associate because I am a firm believer in finishing what you start.” Rich kept pushing forward as inspired by his good performance in his courses. He said, “I was motivated by the fact that I was getting good grades. I was getting all “A’s” and “B’s” and I was in Dean’s List every Semester.” Rich added, “So, the need to keep pushing forward.” Leon wanted to make progress in his profession, and to reach this goal, he had to further his education. Leon said, “in my older years, I wanted to advance in my career.” Not getting a promotion or the possibility of career advancement was another factor that drove participants to graduation.

Making Family Proud. Some of the participants in the study mentioned the desire to make their family proud in their achievement by attaining their educational goals. Willie mentioned of putting his family and his education first. He said, “priority would simply be like family and education” in his educational journey. Joe as earlier mentioned, went by the script

given by his family, and therefore, wanted to make them proud by sticking to it till the end. He said, “excuses only satisfy the person that make them” and “I heard that many times, so when you grow up like that, you don’t know anything else. Except to keep plugging away.” Leon wanted to be a good example to his family, by graduating from college. He said, “it would be the responsibility of having my own family and being responsible for my kids,” and “showing them the importance of education.” He added, “and also, I and my wife showed them how we personally valued education.”

Internal Motivation

All participants leaned on internal motivation to accomplish a successful educational journey. Motivation also came from within. Willie said:

> Because I know myself, one of my downfalls is that I have a problem of not finishing projects and I have a bunch of unfinished projects. One point I promised myself that I am gonna finish all these projects. One of those is to finish my education. In order to succeed, I adopted the mentality of resolve and ultimately telling myself, now no matter what, I am not going to fail, no matter what.

Max motivated himself throughout his academic journey, and he also kept coming back to school. He said, “it is me having perseverance, and to keep showing up. That was the main thing about my success.” Max added, by “being positive, staying positive.” Joe’s sentiments nearly mirrored Max’s comments. He said, “I was never allowed to even consider failure as an option,” and “saying I can’t, and I quit, is not in my vocabulary.” Fred had his own internal motivation that saw him attain his academic aspirations by not deviating, and by staying focused. Fred said:

> The only way to approach any kind of issue, any kind of challenges is head up, you know head on. And not trying to deviate or sidetrack or sidestep the issue. Just to deal with this

> straight up. I attribute my success as far as completing my AS and continuing to stay at school and working on my BS is actually just focusing, you know, bringing the focus back.

Rich had purposed to follow through with his academic goals. Rich said,

> I was committed. I had to make a commitment to myself and to my goals. I made up in my mind that nothing is going to stop me from completing what I had started off to do. I was gonna succeed regardless the college could have done nothing. That's how determined I was. I have always wanted to pursue my education. I am a God-fearing man, that God will make a way.

For Leon, knowing himself played a role in his educational journey. He said:

> Getting to know myself, which I feel is very important. Sometimes you see work, as not being able to. Capable enough to do it. Or you do not put as much into it as you possibly can or should have. And that's why I am saying about knowing myself being responsible. I was determined to be successful. I changed my study habits. I changed my attitude.

Conclusion

Along with each participant's individual educational journey, came exclusive but similar barriers and persistence factors as presented in the narratives. Upon evaluation, the most prevalent barrier amongst the participants was the lack of support in the form of faculty/advisors, campus support services, and financial resources. On the other hand, participants also noted that those same support categories were factors that could facilitate their success if they utilized the support. Hence, there were times in the participants' journey where they needed support and did not receive it. Otherwise, when they received support, it impacted their experience and allowed

them to realize their educational goals. These results answer the research questions in this study, and they will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

Discussion

African American male students throughout the United States have experienced failure in educational systems. Black male students do not graduate from college at the same rate as their White, Asian, and Hispanic counterparts. As attested by the *National Center for Education Statistics* [NCES] (2019), only 40% of Blacks graduate college within six years of starting, as compared with 74% of Asians, 64% of Whites, and 54% of Hispanics. *Black Student College Graduation* (2019) concurred that the graduation rate for Blacks is lower than other racial groups by noting that the graduation rate for college remains at a dismally low 42% nationwide (para 1). The article reported further that Black women outpace Black men in college completions, with 46% of women graduating compared to 35% of men. Although graduation statistics depict part of the graduation disparity picture, a review of literature, such as the one by Hall and Rowan (2000) was necessary to ascertain which issues impede the retention and/or graduation rates of Black males in higher education.

In an attempt to understand this phenomenon, barriers and persistence factors were identified through this qualitative study. Additionally, a platform to share the lived experiences of African American male students at varying stages in their educational journey was created. By using a narrative inquiry methodology, this study brought forth intimate life stories. The narratives shared by the participants presented insight and perspective to understand the challenging academic journeys of African American male students.

In creating the narratives from the one-on-one interviews, the researcher was able to categorize barriers and themes of persistence to answer the main research question, **“Which**

factors influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college?" Further, the research answered these secondary questions:

1. What made you graduate or not graduate from college? What experiences did you encounter? What challenges did you face?
2. What did you do to succeed?
3. In your opinion, did the college play any significant role in alleviating any challenges you faced?
4. What role did the instructors play in your success? In areas, you did not do well.
5. How did the community help you succeed in your college life?
6. Explain how you interacted with other students. Did they assist you when you faced challenges?
7. What other support did the college provide or did not provide for your success?
8. What did you know about college success before joining college?
9. How did you handle challenges that came your way?
10. What else can you say that the college could have done to make you succeed?

While addressing research questions one, eight and ten as listed above, participants identified a lack of financial support, lack of cultural competency, lack of identity, personal issues, time poverty, navigating college, commitments, and academic preparedness as barriers to their educational success. Moreover, participants felt that cultural incompetence from faculty, staff, and students was a major barrier and affected their educational experience. The study also found persistence factors that attributed to the participants' success that addressed research questions number two, three, four, five, six, seven and nine. Those factors include family, campus support services, role models, making the family proud, striving for advancement opportunities,

faculty/advisors, and support from students and cohorts. Furthermore, community, friends, faculty/instructors and internal motivation play a huge role in the persistence that was evident in that all six participants attributed part of their successes to internal motivation. As mentioned earlier, Simmons (2013) literature review uncovered the following four themes: a) college preparedness; b) high aspirations and goals; c) social connections and relationships; and d) growth through student organization commitment, affirming that community, friends, faculty/instructors and internal motivation were persistence factors. Personal characteristics was also identified by Brooks et al. (2014) as one of the factors that plays a role in the success of African American male students. These participants had unique and incredible stories that offered a better insight to the research questions of this study.

In an effort to widen the knowledge of African American male students' academic success, this phenomenological study disclosed the personal educational journeys of six Black male students. All the participants were African American male students who have earned a degree. The interviews acted as a snapshot from one point in their educational journey and attempted to answer the research questions presented.

Chapter 5 offers an overview of the barriers and themes of persistence that evolved from the narratives. In addition, a comparison of past findings, discussion of the unique stories, and limitations of the study are addressed. Suggestions for future research are provided and recommendations on how to support African American male students through their academic careers will also be discussed.

Interpretation of Findings

As outlined in the literature review and problem statement, African American male students have the lowest college graduation rate of 42.2% as compared to their peers, Latinos

who graduate at a rate of 53.2%, Whites at 55.6%, while the Asian males at 67.7% (Wood & Palmer, 2013, p. 223), facing a variety of barriers to completing their education. Barriers and persistence factors that emerged from the narratives of this study agreed with past literature. These narratives revealed additional themes of persistence and barriers worth mentioning.

Common themes in past research have agreed that, cultural beliefs, racism, achievement gap, poverty, family commitment, the lack of preparedness, lack of financial and family support, lack of role models, lack of diversity, emotional distress, education having been criminalized, criminal records, poor teacher training and a lack of cultural competence, equity, and inclusion on campuses where they are conspicuous as the minority, and the high school and college experience all impact African American male students' success, (Phillip, 2011; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Nelson et al., 2020; Heitzeg, 2009; Nocella II et al., 2014; Edelman, 2009). The six participants in this study agreed with these barriers. Some of the participants struggled with the lack of financial support. For example, Willie almost did not finish his associate's degree and had to figure out how to either get education or provide for his family due to the lack of funding as well as being homeless. Fred too, was "broke" all the time. At some point, he saw no need of going back to school as he wanted to save a little bit of money, so he could get himself financially prepared to return to school. Lack of financial support was one of the major barriers for the participants.

Also, lack of campus support nearly derailed the academic journey of four of the participants. Willie reported that "college was an obstacle" due to "lack of communication," hence causing "hardship in getting financial aid" and in undertaking "registration of courses." Joe on his part said that "there was no support staff inside college that helped me." Rich thought the orientation process could have been better as "there were a lot of resources and things on

campus that I was not made aware of." He added that "the college could do a better role in identifying people who have barriers in education." In regard to the instructors, Leon reported that "they allow you to self-destruct" and "so, if you don't want the education that's being offered to you, we 're not going to hold your hand" and "we are not going to feed you."

As mentioned by Nelson et al. (2020), African American male students enrolling into college are burdened with lots of issues to unload in the form of psychological stress, racism, stereotypes, bigotry, xenophobia, and lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion on campuses where they are conspicuous as the minority. Majority of the participants encountered lack of cultural competency in one way or the other, while in pursuit of their education. For example, Max said, "because the way the curriculum worked" it was not relevant to his cultural understanding. Max, therefore, added that the college should not "have the same expectations," and "not have things done only one right way." Max also felt that "college was not designed for Black kids to succeed in college." Max also said, "I had to learn things White people know." Joe reported that "all my instructors were White, and I don't think I ever had a Black instructor." Joe wished that "if somebody had talked to me about racism," as it would have well prepared him for "when people say, well, you can't do that no Black person has ever done that before." Rich on his part noticed a very liberal attitude around the campus. He stated that, "even though they claim that they want to be inclusive to everyone, that did not always include people who believed in God." Rich said that he had a bad experience with an instructor when an instructor asked for an assignment on "an experience you had." He wrote his experience on how he had helped an individual going through some difficult moment and indicated in his writing that God had placed him "there at that moment in order to assist the individual." The instructor's comments to Rich were, "I am not buying the whole God thing." Leon echoed what the literature revealed. He said, "looking

around the classroom and sometimes you being the only person of color in class," made it sometimes difficult for Leon to develop a relationship with others. Leon further observed, "so I mean, it's a challenge because when you look at it as I said, there's only one or two other people of color in the class with you," and "so, that's a challenge within itself." Another barrier that two of the participants encountered in their academic aspirations is that of lack of identity, or lack of belonging. Joe said that "sometimes I felt like I was out there swimming in a big ocean." For Rich he said, "so is like finding myself all over again."

Two-thirds of the participants faced personal issues during their academic journeys, hence slowing their academic progress. These personal issues came about either as mentioned by the literature or by circumstances beyond the participants' control. For instance, the literature reported that many Black male students who were previously incarcerated struggled to pay for college as they were ineligible for Pell Grant (Taylor, 2008; Nocella II et al., 2014). According to Edelman (2009) study, 64% of the 2.3 million people in jail or prison, are minority. Fred mentioned his criminal background "without shame as a testimony" and "being a multiple offender, in and out of judicial penal system." Rich had a criminal past as well and tried to figure out that once he gets his degree, "who would hire me with a criminal record."

Participants in the study had similar, yet unique, personal issues to deal with through their college experience. These issues were not limited to, homelessness, depression and anxiety, child support, recovering addict, and sickness. During college, Willie faced destitution. He said, "I was homeless." Joe on his part, struggled with mental issues. He wished he had "somebody I could go to and say I am scared." He also wished that "if someone had talked to me about not allowing other people to influence my emotions." Rich had to keep paying for child support as he went through school. He said, "I petitioned the court for a suspension of my child support,

while in school" but it was "adamantly denied." Rich added, "they told me that either I better pay my child support, or I was going to go to jail." He felt that he had no choice as he said, "I just thought the system is stuck against me." Also, Rich faced another personal issue, that of a recovering addict. It was a challenge for him and slowed his educational journey as he narrated, "my lifestyle and my drug addiction held me back." He had to deal with the drug addiction. Rich said, "I went to a treatment facility to deal with the drug addiction" as "addiction takes toll on you, with identity" like "who you are." Apart from Fred also being "a recovering addict," he also had to struggle with his mother's sickness or illness" who at that time, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. This led to him dropping out of school so to care for his family. Perhaps everyday personal issues were not specifically discussed in past research, but it is fair to assume from the narratives that each participant struggled with some level of personal issues that compromised their ability to persist in their educational journey.

Time poverty was briefly addressed in past literature but was discussed by several participants. Dealing with an unmanageable number of commitments caused interruptions in the college experience for the participants. Fred, Joe, Willie and Rich felt like they could not fully immerse themselves into the whole college campus experience because of other commitments or simply did not have enough time to get involved. In terms of commitments, Fred said, "I took a break to work" in support of his family. He added, "having to support the family, there was not just enough time in my schedule on my plate for academic at the moment." Joe too was so preoccupied with work as he narrated, "I was working two jobs. I went to school at night, so there was no opportunity to interact," or "create a bond with other students." Willie on the other hand, had a daughter to raise. He said, "I first made my first attempt at college in 1993, the year

my daughter was born and found myself going to raise her by myself." Likewise, Rich had children/family and job/s commitments. Rich said,

> I owed $800.00 a month in child support. So, trying to figure out how I was going to be able pay that and to go to school. I can remember being so tired from working three jobs. Every so often my body would say enough. I would just go to sleep and not wake up for two days. I would miss classes. I would miss work. It wasn't easy.

Navigating college and academic preparedness were two other notable barriers that were unique to this study. The literature identified college experience and preparedness posed a barrier for students. These barriers were discussed by the participants in addressing the eighth question: *What did you know about college success before joining college?* Max said, "I knew very little about college success." In other words, "I knew nothing about college until I got there" and "I failed classes in my first years," he noted. While responding to the question, Willie said, "no experience whatsoever, it was very hard the whole time." Willie also mentioned a hardship he faced in one of the courses. "One of the hardest courses I had to take is logic. That kind of saw that I had a tough time," he added. Joe talked of lack of information and that "I am not even sure I knew what I needed or what I would have appreciated it at the time," as there was no one to "give me some kind of tips on how to create a study plan." Fred was more or less a first-generation college student and "so I knew very little about college." Just like the other participants, Rich said, "I didn't know a lot, but I knew you have to be present; you have to be here" and he figured things as he went along. He also observed that, "the college could do a better job with empowering people to equip them to be independent to their career." In navigating the college, Leon had to find a mentor as well as talk to the instructors. Leon said, "I was exposed to education at a different level when I came to Minnesota to go to school. I

understood that later on, but at the time, I did not." If these students did not utilize the themes of persistence as discussed next, their educational journey could have ended.

Generally, previous studies revealed that the significance of college preparedness, high aspirations and goals, social connections and relationships, growth through student organization commitment, personal characteristics, and mentor programs (whether personal, professional, or legal) contributed to African American male student success (Phillip, 2011; Brooks et al., 2014; Simmons, 2013). Further, Robertson & Mason, (2008) and Nelson et al. (2020) factors as mentioned below have also contributed to degree attainment for African American male students: a) precollege programs that emphasize study skills and resource acquisition; b) making earnest and sincere efforts to recruit African American faculty and staff; c) the introduction of courses that are part of the university's core curriculum and that address the needs of Black students; d) being proactive in minimizing financial, time-management and stress-related variables for Black male students by offering on-campus employment such as work study, internship; e) and paid research opportunities to enhance their advancement, financial responsibilities, and retention. There are several studies on African American male student retention and persistence factors, and the participants in the study overwhelmingly agreed with these factors.

Persistence factors recognized in this study echoed past research of various authors such as Rhoden (2017), Nelson et al. (2020), Brooks (2014), among others. However, it is important to note the unique success factors that emerged. While literature suggested mentor programs as success factors, the participants' narratives supported the importance of having a role model, either in the family, friends, or faculty/instructors. Willie said, "one family member on my mother's side, Auntie R. was a college graduate. Other than Auntie R., my mom went to school

and got a two-year degree." Willie's mom and auntie motivated him to keep going. Joe's family on the other hand, set the bar in which he had to live by. He said, "It didn't matter what was happening out there, we were never allowed in my house to say race or lack of money or whatever, cost me not to do that." As for Fred, he counted the researcher as his role model and a friend. He said, "I just say just keep doing what you're doing (addressing the researcher), you have a lot of people looking up to you. You have a lot of people counting on you, myself included." Fred also counted the faculty/instructors as mentors as he mentioned, "And not being discriminatory but being more of a mentorship situation." Not only were these group of people role models, but they gave the participants the courage to keep going in their academic journey.

Considering the various categories of support in the literature and in this study, the support of other students (whom they considered as friends), was greatly valued by the participants. For example, Willie mentioned of a logic class that "was like destroying my brain," and credited his fellow student for "his intervention to me being able to pass my logic class." He added, "I met a bunch of other people who were close to me and helped me in the process." Max on his part said that one thing he learned was listening to others and "sharing with other students." Fred also on the other hand, remembered some students because "they played a major role or major part of my day-to-day active environment." He said that by allowing himself "to be a voice in helping other people," he was able to maintain his serenity or his own peace in the process. Likewise, Rich said that he had a group of students that they stuck together, took notes together, exchanged resources to overcome some of the barriers and challenges that they faced. He also had people that he helped. He added, "and so, when you are helping others to succeed as well, then that kinda helps you in return." Leon too, had a couple of guys who he went to school with. He called them his mentors because they showed him or taught him the ropes, "if you

wanted to learn with them," he said. Also, support from the faculty/advisors played a role in the academic success of the participants. Willie said that "instructors helped the way through. Smoothed the way – gave guidance, otherwise would not have made it." He added, they helped me "navigate the administrative process and was successful" as a result. Max said, "my advisors and the people who were advising, significantly played a role because without them, it would have been hard to be successful." Fred also talked of the support he received. He said,

> There were key individuals, when it came to my personal struggles that played an instrumental part in my success. The entire staff that I dealt with were pretty understanding when it came to my personal struggles or my academic struggles or my day-to-day struggles.

Rich, too, said, "you meet so many staff [and] faculty in college, and staff that you talk to that give you advice, and mentor you along. If they don't see you, they tend to find out, 'where is Rich?" As for Leon, this is what he had to say about his instructors, "I like to say they motivated me and others. They challenged us in more than one way, in reference to working in class. Or relating with us outside the class, on campus as well as just caring."

Another persistence factor that contributed to the participants' educational experience is that of wanting to achieve. Participants pursued and continued with their degrees in order to attain their degrees, for their advancement opportunities, as well as to make family proud. Willie said, "so in 2013, I completed my associate degree at Minneapolis College, and I am now pursuing my bachelor's degree at Metro." He added that, "priority would simply be like family and education." In how he attained his achievement, Max said, "I handled it by being stubborn, choosing not to quit, reading literature, to learn and to grow from what I was reading." In attaining his educational aspirations, Joe said, "no matter how long it took, you had to check off

those goals until you go to the end," and to "keep plugging away." Fred graduated with his associate's as he mentioned, "because I am a firm believer in finishing what you start. I was brought up that way, I was raised that way." Rich was getting good grades and was on the Dean's list every semester, and so the need for him "to keep pushing forward towards his degree attainment." Leon mentioned that "in my older years, I wanted to advance in my career." He also said, "the responsibility of having my own family and showing them the importance of education" kept him going.

Lastly, the literature reported students who exhibited intrinsic motivation, personal sources of inspiration and perseverance, personal achievement goals, and positive psychology – human strengths that help people rise with courage, hope, honesty, perseverance, just but to name a few -- were high achieving students (Brooks et al., 2014; Gable & Haidt, 2005; Sheldon & King, 2001; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). All participants, in this study, exhibited internal motivation as a major persistence factor that played a critical role in their educational journey. Willie said, "in order to succeed, I adopted the mentality of resolve and ultimately telling myself, now no matter what, I am not going to fail, no matter what." Max on his part said, "it is me having perseverance, and to keep showing up. That was the main thing about my success. Being positive, staying positive." Joe was never even allowed to consider failure as option. He mentioned that "saying I can't, and I quit, is not in my vocabulary." Fred on the other hand said, "I attribute my success as far as completing my associate degree and continuing to stay at school and working on my bachelor's is actually just focusing, you know, bringing the focus back." Rich too was very determined, "I was committed. I had to make a commitment to myself and to my goals. I made up in my mind that nothing is going to stop me from completing what I had started off to do." Leon summed it up by saying, "I was determined to be successful. I

changed my study habits. I changed my attitude." Whether it was the degree completion, wanting future employment opportunities, or making family proud, these participants showcased their courage and determination to succeed.

Barriers and persistence factors established through this study supported those already recognized in previous literature. In the spirit of narrative inquiry, the stories of the participants provided more detail and context. In-depth personal stories allowed true insight and a better understanding of how the persistence factors helped the participants to overcome the overwhelming number of barriers they faced while completing their degrees. Hence, the benefits of collecting the lived experiences of African American male students.

Limitations

Using the narrative inquiry methodology, this study provided rich and descriptive stories. However, due to a global pandemic, three of the narratives were collected using an online environment called Zoom, two by face-to-face interview, while one was over the phone. Had all the interviews been in person, the researcher may have been able to build better rapport with the participants, thus, creating more in-depth and personal narratives. Also, as far as participant selection is concerned, the researcher relied on referrals from friends and colleagues. For the majority of the participants, the researcher had little knowledge of their academic experience. Moreover, the researcher did not have prior knowledge of how much the participant would disclose about their personal academic accomplishments. If the researcher had a limitless number of possible participants, there may have been a more defined participant selection for the study. Since the researcher was employed at Metro State University and based on its Minneapolis Campus, several participants had connections to the university and to Minneapolis College. With a bigger number of participants, it would be beneficial to diversify the participant pool as well.

Recommendations

Examining the academic journeys of six African American male students with a qualitative lens enabled for organic and personal narratives to be created. These narratives were from African American male students at differing points in their educational journeys. The narratives provided an opportunity to learn what factors impacted these students' educational journey and what led to persistence in advancing their degree programs. The narratives from this study and the literature emphasize the need for:

1. An assigned advisor to ensure African American male students are connected to campus and to African American student support services. Strengthened services and outreach with an assigned advisor may reduce the number of students that fall through the cracks.
2. African American male student support services that offer support for students and their families. Also, offering a specific orientation for African American male students that focuses on connection to campus and seminars on how to navigate college. This should include information on financial resources, scholarships, health and counseling services, study skills, time management, and degree completion.
3. Cultural competency training for faculty and staff at colleges and even students. Campuses should offer equity training for all students, staff, and faculty. Additionally, make earnest and sincere efforts to recruit African American faculty and staff, as well as add courses that are part of the institution's core curriculum that address the needs of Black students. College staff should be intentional, empathetic, strategic, and patient when providing guidance, development, and support for Black

male students to help them develop a healthy work/school/life balance (Nelson et al., 2020; Phillip, 2011; Robertson & Mason, 2008).

4. Mentoring programs for incoming African American male students. New students should be matched with upper-class students, so students have a resource to help with navigating through the college processes. Therefore, creating an opportunity for a better connection to campus and other underrepresented students.

A wealth of literature on persistence is available on different populations. However, this study's findings and recommendations provide a better perspective on how African American male students' persistence in higher education is achieved. Hence, hopefully producing better experiences, increased persistence, and better completion and success rates.

Future Research

African American male students are underrepresented in the higher education arena. This study endeavored to raise the voices of African American male students and to understand their perspectives on what barriers slowed their success, but also what factors enhanced their degree attainment. Only six participants were interviewed due to the timeframe of the study. Ideally, enlarging this study to gather more personal stories from more participants could disclose more barriers and persistence factors, thus, providing an opportunity to learn more individual narratives of African American male students.

The selection of the participants could be more intentional. Future research could categorize participants by the completion of degree type. Additionally, the researcher followed a list of guiding questions to the research questions of the study were articulated. However, the researcher desired the interviews to be organic and unique to each participant. Future research could limit the interview questions to, "Describe your academic journey," thus, providing a more

personal flow to the narrative. This may allow participants the opportunity to share their story in their own customized way. Generally, and most importantly, future research requires more stories from African American male students on their academic experience. By adding more participants to this research, a better understanding and awareness will be obtained.

Researcher's Reflection

Although the stories of the participants are unique, the barriers African American male students face are similar to other African American male students. The six participants revealed their successes and their (un)success. These stories displayed just how hard it is for African American male students to persist and graduate from college. These personal stories provided the researcher a better insight into how to serve African American male students pursuing their education. Given that these narratives presented a better understanding of the challenges African American male students encounter, this information will be shared with the researcher's university and with other institutions of higher learning. This study, likewise, will be used to better inform those supporting African American male students.

Whereas the barriers established may be similar to students from other ethnicities, this study provided insight on how to better support African American male students through their academic careers. In essence, the researcher learned that the stories from these participants must be shared and celebrated. Most of the participants' academic journeys are still in progress and they need encouragement and support to be successful. These stories are examples of determination and show how African American male students need support to improve degree completion rates. The researcher is thankful for the participants' willingness to open themselves up and share their lived experiences for the benefit of this study.

Conclusions

Chapter 5 presented an overall summary of the study, featured unique barriers and persistence factors, and limitations. In addition, recommendations on how to support African American male students, suggestions for future research, and final thoughts of the researcher concluded this chapter. Above all, this study was a platform to share the lived academic experiences of six African American male students. Also, this study showed that African American male students are not just a group that is to be dismissed in statistics. These students have unique and incredible stories of pursuing their dreams of higher education. With more life stories being shared by African American male students, a better understanding of how to support these students at every point in their educational journey can be learned to make the path to degree completion for many African American male students achievable.

References

Andrade, M. S. (2014). The successful educational journeys of American indian women: Forming aspirations for higher education. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, *16*(1), 21-38.

Black student college graduation rates remain low, but modest progress begins to show. (2019) *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. http://www.jbhe.com/features/50_blackstudent_gradrates.html

Brigg, A.R., Coleman, M., & Morrison, M. (2012). *Research methods in educational leadership & management.* Sage.

Brooks, M., Jones, C., & Burt, I. (2013). Are African American male undergraduate retention programs successful? An evaluation of an undergraduate African American male retention program. *Journal of African American Studies*, *17*(2), 206–221.

Brooks, M., Jones, C & Latten, J. (2014). African American males educational success factors. *International Journal of Social Science Studies,* 2(2). [PAGES]

Brooms, D.R. (2019). Not in this alone: Black men's bonding, learning, and sense of belonging in black male initiative programs. *Urban Rev, 51,* 748–767. https://doi-org.trmproxy.mnpals.net/10.1007/s11256-019-00506-5

Brooms, D. R., Clark, J. S., & Druery, J. E. (2021). "We can redefine ourselves": Enhancing Black college men's persistence through counterspaces. *Journal of Black Studies, 52*(3), *277–295*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934720976410

Caregivers' moral narratives of their African American children's out-of-school suspensions: Implications for effective family-school collaborations. (2013). *Social Work, 58*(3), 263-272. https://doi-org.trmproxy.mnpals.net/10.1093/sw/swt017

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.*)*. SAGE Publications.

Davis, R. L., Coward, L. A., & Jackson, D. D. (2013). The influence of selected academic and institutional support factors on the retention rates of African American males. (Doctoral Dissertation). *NAAAS & Affiliates Conference Monographs*, 274–288.

Edelman, M. W. (2009). The cradle to prison pipeline: America's new apartheid. *Harvard Journal of African American Public Policy, 15*(Summer Issue), 67-68.

Fortson, S. B. (1997). An evaluation of a program to influence academic self-concept among African American male college students. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, *34*(3), 104–107. https://doi-org.trmproxy.mnpals.net/10.1002/j.2161-1920.1997.tb00986.x

Fraenkel J.R., Wallen, N.E., & Hyyun, H. H. (2019). *How to design and evaluate research in education* (10th ed.). McGraw-Hill.

Gable, S. L., & Haidt, J. (2005). What (and why) is positive psychology? *Review of General Psychology*, *9*(2), 103–110. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.9.2.103

Goings, R. B. (2016). Investigating the experiences of two high-achieving Black male HBCU graduates: An exploratory study. *Negro Educational Review*, *67*(1–4), 54–75. http://search.ebscohost.com.trmproxy.mnpals.net/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=123142926&site=ehost-live

Goings, R. B. (2016). (Re)defining the narrative. *Adult Education Quarterly, 66*(3), 237-253. https://doi-org.trmproxy.mnpals.net/10.1177/0741713616644776

Hall, R. E., & Rowan, G. T. (2000). African American males in higher education: A descriptive/qualitative analysis. *Journal of African American Men, 5*(3), 3-14.

Harris, S. M. (2018). Barriers to Black male college success: Identifying and conquering the saboteur. *Negro Educational Review, 69*(1–4), 77–99.

Heitzeg, N. A. (2009). Education or incarceration: Zero tolerance policies and the school to prison pipeline. *In forum on public policy online* (Vol. 2009, No. 2). Oxford Round Table.

Howard, T. C. (2013). How does it feel to be a problem? Black male students, schools, and learning in enhancing the knowledge base to disrupt deficit frameworks. *Review of Research in Education, 37*(1), 54–86. https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X12462985

Keith, J.F., Stastny, J.F., & Brunt, J.F. (2016). Barriers and strategies for success for American Indian college students: A Review. *Journal of College Student Development, 57*, 698 - 714.

Keller, R. R., & Lacy, M. G. (2013). Propensity score analysis of an honors program's contribution to students' retention and graduation outcomes. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council, 14*(2), 73-84.

Kivunja, C. (2018). Distinguishing between theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework: A systematic review of lessons from the field. *International Journal of Higher Education, 7*(6), 44-53. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v7n6p44

Love, B. (2019, March 19). *We want to do more than survive.* C-SPAN https://www.c-span.org/video/?458837-1/we-survive#

Luke Wood, J., & Palmer, R. T. (2013). The likelihood of transfer for Black males in community colleges: Examining the effects of engagement using multilevel, multinomial modeling. *Journal of Negro Education, 82*(3), 272–287.

McCallum, C. M. (2012). *Understanding the relationships and experiences that contribute to African Americans' decision to enroll in doctoral education*. ProQuest LLC.

Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. John Wiley & Sons.

Move to End Violence (2016, September 7). *Ally or co-conspirator?: What it means to act #InsSolidarity*. https://movetoendviolence.org/blog/all-co-conspirator-means-act-insolidarity/

National Institute of Mental Health (2020). *Depression.* https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression/index.shtml

NBC news. (2020, Jun 15). *How schools are funneling black students into the prison system |think| nbc news* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZsgk9acYbo

NCES. (2019, February). *Indicator 23: Postsecondary Graduation Rates.* National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_red.asp#info

Nelson, L., & Lind, D. (2015). The school to prison pipeline, explained. http://www.justicepolicy.org/news/8775

Nelson, M.S., Knibbs, L., Alexander, Q.R., Cherry, D.C., Johnson, B., Johnson, J. (2020, September). Advising Black male students in 2020 and beyond. *Academic Advising Today, 43(3)*. https://nacad,ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/Advising-Black-Male-Students-in-2020-and-Beyond.aspx?fbclid=IwAR3Pskahj0X9PyqYwAJDZ6FMOb9T1Tmsor7ZxbbQOkGi5c1LhGAMPgC1o8

Nocella II, A.J., Parmar, P., & Stovall, D. (2014). *From education to incarceration: Dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline*. Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Now this news. (2020, Aug 6). *How Norway's prisons are different from America's* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zNpehw-Yjvs&feature=emb_title

Ogbu, J., & Simons, H. (1998). Voluntary and involuntary minorities: A cultural-ecological theory of school performance with some implications for education. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 29*(2), 155-188.

Owens, D., Lacey, K., Rawls, G., & Holbert- Quince, J. (2010). First-generation African American male college students: Implications for career counselors. *Career Development Quarterly, 58*(4), 291–300. https://doi-org.trmproxy.mnpals.net/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2010.tb00179.x

Patel, S. (2015). The research paradigm-methodology, epistemology and ontology-explained in simple language. http://salmapatel.co.uk/academia/the- research-paradigm- methodology- epistemology-and-ontology-explained-in-simple-language/

Phillip, A. (2011). Community college of Philadelphia programs provide a support system for Black male students. *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education, 28*(23), 7. https://search.proquest.com/openview/7c78b1e98581f92f5c012e7cadb19af4/1.pdf/pq-origsite=gscholar&cb1=27805

Rhoden, S. (2017). "Trust me, you are going to college": How trust influences academic achievement in Black males. *Journal of Negro Education, 86*(1), 52–64.

Robertson, R. V., & Mason, D. (2008). What works? A qualitative examination of the factors related to the academic success of African American males at a predominantly White college in the south. *Challenge (1077193X), 14*(2), 67–89.

Sadala, M. & Adorno, R. (2001). Phenomenology as a method to investigate the experiences lived: A perspective from Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's thought. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 37*. 282-293.

Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. A*merican Psychologist,* 55(1), *5-14.* https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-006X.55.1.5

Sheldon, K. M., & King, L. (2001). Why positive psychology is necessary. *American Psychologist, 56*(3), 216-217. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.3.216

Shotton, H., Oosahwe, E., & Cintrón, R. (2007). Stories of success: Experiences of American Indian students in a peer-mentoring retention program. *The Review of Higher Education, 31*(1), 81–107.

Simmons, L. D. (2013). Factors of persistence for African American men in a Student support organization. *Journal of Negro Education*, *82*(1), 62–74.

Simms, K. B., Knight, D. M., & Dawes, K. I. (1993). Institutional factors that influence the academic success of African American men. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, *1*(3), 253–266. https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.0103.253

Taylor, J. M. (2008). Pell grants for prisoners: Why should we care? *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons, 17*(1), 18-29.

Tolliver III, D. V., & Miller, M. T. (2018). Graduation 101: Critical strategies for African American men college completion. *Education, 138*(4), 301–308. http://search.ebscohost.com.trmproxy.mnpals.net/login.aspx?direct=true&db=keh&AN=130165010&site=ehost-live

T. W. D. (2015). African American male student success. *University Business*, *18*(4), 31.

http://search.ebscohost.com.trmproxy.mnpals.net/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=103326366&site=ehost-live

Von Robertson, R., & Chaney, C. (2015). The influence of stereotype threat on the responses of Black males at a predominantly White college in the south. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, *7*(8), 20–42. http://search.ebscohost.com.trmproxy.mnpals.net/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=102095930&site=ehost-live

Williamson, S. Y. (2010). Within-group ethnic differences of black male stem majors and factors affecting their persistence in college. *Journal of International & Global Studies*, *1*(2), 45–73. http://search.ebscohost.com.trmproxy.mnpals.net/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=60071753&site=ehost-live

Wood, J., & Palmer, R. (2013). Understanding the personal goals of Black male community college students: Facilitating academic and psychosocial development. *Journal of African American Studies*, *17*(2), 222–241. https://link-springer-com.trmproxy.mnpals.net/10.1007/s12111-013-9248-3

APPENDIX A

Consent Letter

A Qualitative Narrative Study: "Which Factors influencing African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college?"

Dear Participant:

The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with this researcher, the instructor, or Minnesota State University Moorhead (MSUM).

The purpose of the study is to understand what factors influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college. The procedure will be a single, holistic narrative study design. At this stage in the research, process will be generally defined as percepts of your experiences and making sense of what challenges you encountered that lead you to (not) graduating.

Data will be collected at various points, during the year based on your availability. Data collection will involve documents (if need be), interviews (transcripts of interviews made by the researcher). Individual involved in the data collection will be the researcher and the participants.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before participating or during the time that you are participating. I will be happy to share the findings with you after the research is completed. However, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way, and only the researcher will know your identity as a participant.

There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. The expected benefits associated with your participation are the information about the experiences encountered as a learning tool, and the opportunity to participate in a qualitative research study.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed. We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential. You may use a pseudonym if desired. To help protect your confidentiality: (1) storage of data and notes will be kept in a secured location accessible only to the research team; (2) purging of all personally identifiable information from transcripts, and research reports submitted to us. If I write an article or book about this research project, your identity will be protected to the fullest extent possible. This research project may involve making digital audio recordings of your interview conversations. The digital audio recordings, accompanying notes, and transcriptions will be kept on a password protected computer. Information from this study will be kept until May 1, 2022, when all information will be destroyed. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue or refuse the follow-up interview at any time.

Please feel free to ask questions regarding this study. You may contact Jeremiah Rotich if you have additional questions or Dr. Boyd Bradbury. Contact for Jeremiah Rotich, Metro State Mpls Campus, 651-793-1637 or email at Jeremiah.Rotich@go.mnstate.edu and for Dr. Boyd Bradbury, MSUM Faculty, Phone: 218-477-2471 or email: Bradbury@mnstate.edu. Any questions about your rights may be directed to Dr. Lisa I. Karch, Chair of the MSUM Institutional Review Board at 218-477-2699 or by e-mail at: irb@mnstate.edu.

Acceptance to Participate: *Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above, and you have consent to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty after signing this form.*

_____ _____

Signature Date

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Jeremiah Rotich

APPENDIX B

Permission to Survey Metropolitan State University Human Subjects

Title of Proposal: "Which Factors influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college?"

Name of Investigators: Dr. Boyd Bradbury and Jeremiah Rotich

Abstract: Black male students (also known as African American male students) graduate from college at a lower rate than their Latino, White, and Asian counterparts for various reasons, including a lack of engagement, a lack of personal goals, institutional factors, and dispositions. Other reasons that impede students from achieving their academic goals include limited academic and personal support, a lack of flexible policies, and a lack of diversity engagement. These challenges are faced by both the 2-year colleges and the 4-year institutions. This study, therefore, will employ a narrative inquiry approach in exploring factors that influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college through the stories of four individuals.

keywords: Black males, African American male student, college, persistence, barriers

The Administrator,

I am asking for permission to interview African American male students who have graduated from Metropolitan State University and Minneapolis College. My interview will take approximately one hour and will address the following questions.

“Which Factors influence African American male students’ persistence in and graduation from college?” To answer the overall research question, secondary questions were explored through interviews and the literature review:

1. What made you graduate or not graduate from college? What experiences did you encounter? What challenges did you face?
2. What did you do to succeed?
3. In your opinion, did the college play any significant role in alleviating any challenges you faced?
4. What role did the instructors play in your success? In areas, you did not do well.
5. How did the community help you succeed in your college life?
6. Explain how you interacted with other students. Did they assist you when you faced challenges?
7. What other support did the college provide or did not provide for your success?
8. What did you know about college success before joining college?
9. How did you handle challenges that came your way?
10. What else can you say that the college could have done to make you succeed?

_____ _____

Signature of Institutional Representative Date

_____

Printed Name of Institutional Representative

_____

Name of School District/Company/Institution

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

Overall question: "Which Factors influence African American male students' persistence in and graduation from college?"

Secondary questions

1. What made you graduate or not graduate from college? What experiences did you encounter? What challenges did you face?
2. What did you do to succeed?
3. In your opinion, did the college play any significant role in alleviating any challenges you faced?
4. What role did the instructors play in your success? In areas, you did not do well.
5. How did the community help you succeed in your college life?
6. Explain how you interacted with other students. Did they assist you when you faced challenges?
7. What other support did the college provide or did not provide for your success?
8. What did you know about college success before joining college?
9. How did you handle challenges that came your way?
10. What else can you say that the college could have done to make you succeed?

APPENDIX D. THEMES

Barrier Themes		
Theme	**Category**	**Text Evidence**
Lack of Support	Role Models	Willie: "No guidance, nobody… I ended up dropping out." Had no role models that encourage education.
		Joe: "I don't think I ever had somebody that was a role model that I could look up to."
	Advisors/Mentors	Willie: "I had nobody to help me figure out what is what."
		Joe: Lack of somebody that I could say to, "I don't know how to deal with A, B, or C." "If someone had sat me down and talked to me about how to manage time and money."
	Financial	Willie: "I was homeless though I had a job." "I had to figure out, getting education or providing for the family."
		Joe: "I don't think there was anybody or any part of the school that stepped up to do anything that I recall, or I would consider that helped or assisted me." "I worked my regular job Monday through Friday, and my part time job on the weekends."
		Fred: "I was "broke" all the time." "I was like well, no need to go back now let me save a little bit of money." "Get myself financially prepared to go back to go."
		Rich: "So, I had one job, and I started school." "And got another job, and then another job." "So, I had three jobs while I was pursuing my education full time that was 12 credits."
	Campus	Willie: "College was an obstacle." "Misinformation by staff." "Caused hardship in getting financial aid, registration of courses." "Lack of communication."
		Joe: "There was no support staff inside the college that helped me."
		Rich: "I think orientation process could have been better." "I think that there were a lot of resources and things on campus that I was not made aware of." "The college could do a

		better role in identifying people who have barriers in education."
		Leon: Regarding instructors: "They allow you to self-destruct." "So, if you don't want the education that's been offered to you, we're not going to give it to you." We're are not going to hold your hand." "We're not going to feed you."
	Friends	Joe: "A fear of not being accepted by peers."
Lack of Cultural Competency	Campus	Max: "Because the way the curriculum worked; it is not relevant to my cultural understanding."
		Rich: "I noticed around the campus that there was a very liberal attitude." "Even though they claim that they want to be inclusive to everyone, that did not always include people who believed in God."
		Leon: "Looking around the classroom and sometimes you being the only person of color in class." "Sometimes as well, is a challenge until you are able to develop a relationship with others in the class."
	Faculty/Students/Staff	Max: "Not to have same expectations." "Of systems that should not have things done only one right way."
		Joe: "All my instructors were White."
		Rich: "A bad experience that I had with an instructor is when the instructor asked us to write an assignment on "an experience you had." "I wrote my experience which was helping an individual going through some difficult moment." "And I indicated in my writing that God placed me there at that moment in order to assist the individual." "So, he said, "I am not buying the whole God thing."
	Racism	Max: "I think college was not designed for Black kids to succeed in college."
		Joe: "If somebody had talked to me about racism." "When people say, well, you can't do that no black person has ever done that before."
	Diversity	Max: "I had to learn things White people know."
		Joe: "I don't think I ever had a Black instructor."

		Leon: “So I mean, it’s a challenge because when you look at it as I said, there’s only one or two other people of color in the class with you.” “So that’s a challenge within itself.”
Lack of Identity	Lack of Belonging	Willie: “Not every door may open up to you, but you don’t have to fall prey to the conditions that has been given to you. And there are a lot.”
		Joe: “Sometimes I felt like I was out there swimming in a big ocean all by myself and I did not necessarily know what my next move would be.”
		Rich: “Ahm, so is like finding myself all over again.”
Personal Issues	Homelessness	Willie: “I was homeless.”
	Depression/Anxiety	Joe: “Somebody I could go to and say I am scared.” “If someone had talked to me about not allowing other people to influence my emotions.” Had no one to go to for Mental Issues.
	Child Support	Rich: “I petitioned the Court for a suspension of my child support while in school.” “Was adamantly denied.” “They told me that either I better pay my child support, or I was going to go to jail.” “I just thought the system is stuck against me.”
	Criminal Background	Fred: “I say this without shame.” “As a testimony about my background and my past.” “Being a multiple offender, in and out of Judicial penal system.”
		Rich: “I had a criminal past.” “And trying to figure out, even if I went back to school who would hire me when I get a degree and with a criminal record.”
	Recovering Addict	Fred: “As well as being a recovering addict.”
		Rich: “By my lifestyle and my drug addiction held me back.” “Until I dwelt with drug addiction.” “I went to a treatment facility to deal with the drug addiction.” “Addiction kinda takes a toll on you, ahm with identity, like “who you are.”
	Sickness	Fred: “When it came to my mother and her sickness or illness.” “At that time being diagnosed with terminal cancer.”

Navigating College		Max: “I knew very little about college success.” “I knew nothing about college until I got there.”
		Joe: “Lack of information.” “I am not even sure I knew what I needed or what I would have appreciated it at the time.”
		Fred: “I am actually more or less a first-generation college student.” “So, I knew very little about college.”
		Rich: “I didn’t know a lot, but I knew you have to be present; you have to be here.” “But Yes, I didn’t Know a lot.” “I kinda figured things out as I went a long.”
		Leon: “Find a mentor.” “To talk to the instructors and use the study lab.” In learning to navigate the college.
Time Poverty	Family	Fred: “I took a break and went back to work.” In support of the family.
	Involvement on Campus	Joe: “I was working two jobs.” “I went to school at night, so there was no opportunity to interact.” “Create a bond with other students.”
Commitments	Children/Family	Willie: “I first made my first attempt at college in 1993.” “The year my daughter was born and found myself going to raise her by all myself.”
		Rich: “I owed $800.00 a month in child support.” “So, trying to figure out how I was going to be able pay that and to go school.”
		Fred: “Having to support the family, there was not just enough time in my schedule on my plate for academics at the moment.”
	Job/s	Rich: “I can remember being so tired from working three jobs.” “Every so often my body would say enough.” “I would just go to sleep and not wake up for two days.” “I would miss classes.” “I would miss work.” “It wasn’t easy.”
Academic Preparedness	Not ready for college	Willie: “No experience whatsoever.” “It was very hard the whole time.”
		Joe: No one to “Give me some kind of tips on how to create a study plan.”
		Rich: “The college could do a better job with empowering people to equip them to be independent to their career.”
		Leon: “That I was not prepared.”

	Coursework	Willie: “One of the hardest courses I had to take is logic.” “That kind of saw that I had a tough time.”
		Max: “I failed classes in my first years.”
		Leon: “I was exposed to education at a different level when I came to MN to go to school.” “I understood that later on, but at the time, I did not.”

Themes of Persistence		
Theme	**Category**	**Text Evidence**
Support	Family	Willie: “Lessons from my mother and auntie: being self-reliant and to seek for help if I can’t help myself.”
		Max: “We are talking about my family.” “They have been very supportive of me.” “Praying for me, believing in me, giving me emotional support.”
		Joe: “When you are poor, we were always told, you got to work twice as hard.” “You always had to have a goal and you always had to measure.”
	Financial	Max: “Financial aid in my undergraduate, I had Pell Grant Federal Aid.” “I was awarded different scholarships.” “That was also a part of a big funding for my undergraduate degree.”
		Fred: “They provided financial aid financial relief.”
		Rich: Regarding student employee position: “That connected me to finances which was key because it removed that financial barrier for me.” “I found out about resources in the school and that connected me to scholarships.” “I got two top scholarships at the time.”
	Community	Willie: “A dad of a friend was involved in community education, especially in music, and helped local musicians find their way in that aspect.” Will emulate the good deeds in future.
		Fred: “There were people who understood my plight as well my struggle.” “Those people

		compoundly worked together to help me to reenter or reintegrate myself back into the mainstream of society.”
		Rich: “And then also, it made me feel part of the community.” “I got to know the school resources, the people.” “I was more invested in my education.” “Not only in my education, but also in the community at large.” “Minneapolis college was like home.”
		Leon: “People in the community are to a sense took care of me based of their children attending the same school that I did.” “Going and visiting their homes, their churches.” “They supported us.” “They would always give us words of encouragement.” “Talked to us the importance of completing your degree/education.”
	Campus Support Services	Max: Regarding support services on campus: “With all the social network, Pan African Community, network of African American students, and faculty network support, gave me some great support.”
		Fred: “One of the groups I was actually involved in with was African American Brotherhood (SAAB), that kept me grounded for a while.” “They provided counseling, they provided instructions, they provided guidance, they provided community, they provided family.” The structures put in place in both campuses.” Were helpful.
		Rich: “One of the jobs I got was within the school.” “So, student employee position, even though I had a criminal background, Public Safety still hired me.” “The student employee position allowed me to do homework while I was working.” “Which was huge because working three jobs and carrying a full course load, you don’t have a long of time to be able to study.”
		Leon: “The support was here, such as the Black student union, academic advising.” “We had mentoring, and the librarians were very supportive.”
	Faculty/Advisors	Willie: “Instructors helped navigate the way through.” “Smoothed the way -- gave guidance, otherwise would not have made it.”

		"Navigate administrative process and was successful."
		Max: "My advisors and the people who were advising, significantly played a role because without them, it would have been hard to be successful."
		Fred: "There were key individuals, when it came to my personal struggles that played an instrumental part in my success." "The entire staff that I dealt with were pretty understanding when it came to my personal struggles or my academic struggles or my day-to-day struggles."
		Rich: "You meet so many staff faculty in college, and staff that you talk to that give you advice, and mentor you along." "If they don't see you, they tend to find out: ["where is Rich?"]"
		Leon: "I like to say they motivated me and others." "They challenged us in more than one way, in reference to working in class." "Or relating with us outside the class, on campus as well as just caring."
	Friends	Willie: "I took a logic course in my last year at Minneapolis College and it was like destroying my brain." "And a brother originally from Liberia, that was in a computer class tutored me." "I tribute his intervention to me being able to pass my logic class." "I met a bunch of other people, who were close to me and helped me in the process."
		Max: "One thing I learned is listening to others." "And sharing with other students."
		Fred: "There were some students who I remember because, they played a major role or major part of my day-to-day active environment."
		Fred: "As far as maintaining your serenity or your own peace in the process, I allow myself to be a voice in helping other people."
		Rich: "I had a group of students, that we kinda stuck together." "We took notes together." "Exchanged resources to overcome some of the barriers and challenges we faced." "I also had people that I helped. "And

		so, when you are helping others to succeed as well, then that kinda helps you in return."
		Leon: "I had a couple of guys that went to school with me." "I'm just going to call them my mentors because they were" "What they basically did was they show, or they taught you the ropes, if you wanted to learn with them."
Role Models	Family	Willie: "One family member on my mother's side, Auntie R. was a college graduate. Other than Auntie R., my mom went to school and goa a two-year degree."
		Joe: "It didn't matter what was happening out there, we were never allowed in my house to say race or lack of money or whatever, cost me not to do that."
		Leon: "What made me graduate from college was basically my family." "Mom and dad, that's family." "Aunt and uncle, that's family."
	Friends	Fred: "I just say just keep doing what you're doing (addressing the researcher), you have a lot of people looking up to you." "You have a lot of people counting on you, myself included."
	Faculty/Instructors	Willie: "Most instructors played a critical role, helped us." "Being able to give information that would be the key to being successful in school."
		Max: "The professors playing a great role as well."
		Fred: "I attribute that to the faculty and staff because they take on a heavy load dealing with students from all walks of life, in various ethnic cultures and different believes and perspectives." "And not being discriminatory but being more of a mentorship situation."
		Rich: "A lot of these instructors were patient." "Instead of just giving you a poor grade, they explained why and how to fix it." "That definitely helped with my success."
Achievement	Degree Completion	Willie: "So in 2013, I completed my associate degree at Minneapolis College."
		Max: "How I handled it is by being stubborn, choosing not to quit."

		Joe: “It was goal setting and then, no matter how long it took, you had to check off those goals until you got to the end.”
		Fred: “I graduated with my associate because I am a firm believer in finishing what you start.”
		Rich: “I was motivated by the fact that I was getting good grades.” “I was getting all “A’s” and “B’s” and I was in Dean’s List every Semester.” “So, the need to keep pushing forward.”
	Advancement Opportunities	Willie: “I am now pursuing my bachelor’s degree at Metro.”
		Max: “Reading literature, to learn and grow from what I was reading.”
		Leon: “In my older years, I wanted to advance in my career.”
	Making Family Proud	Willie: “Priority would simply be like family and education.”
		Joe: “Excuses only satisfy the person that make them.” “I heard that many times, so when you grow up like that, you don’t know anything else.” “Except to keep plugging away.”
		Fred: “I was brought up that way, I was raised that way.”
		Leon: “It would be the responsibility of having my own family and being responsible for my kids.” “Showing them the importance of education.” “And how I personally valued, as well as my wife.”
Internal Motivation	Determination	Willie: “Because I know myself, one of my downfalls is that I have a problem of not finishing projects and I have a bunch of unfinished projects.” “One point I promised myself that I am gonna finish all these projects.” “One of those is to finish my education.” “In order to succeed, I adopted the mentality of resolve and ultimately telling myself, now no matter what, I am not going to fail, no matter what.”
		Max: “It is me having perseverance, and to keep showing up.” “That was the main thing about my success.” “Being positive, staying positive.”

		Joe: “I was never allowed to even consider failure as an option.” “Saying I can’t, and I quit, is not in my vocabulary.”
		Fred: “The only way to approach any kind of issue, any kind of challenges is head up, you know head on.” “And not trying to deviate or sidetrack or sidestep the issue.” “Just to deal with this straight up.” “I attribute my success as far as completing my AS and continuing to stay at school and working on my BS is actually just focusing, you know, bringing the focus back.”
		Rich: “I was committed.” “I had to make a commitment to myself and to my goals.” “I made up in my mind that nothing is going to stop me from completing what I had started off to do.” “I was gonna succeed regardless, the college could have done nothing.” “That’s how determined I was.” “I have always wanted to pursue my education.” “I am a God-fearing man, that God will make a way.”
		Leon: “Getting to know myself, which I feel is very important.” “Sometimes you see work, as not being able to.” “Capable enough to do it.” “Or you do not put as much into it as you possibly can or should have.” “And that’s why I am saying about knowing myself being responsible.” “I was determined to be successful.” “I changed my study habits.” “I changed my attitude.”