

## ABSTRACT

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AFRICAN AMERICAN TRANSFER  
STUDENTS AT A TRADITIONALLY WHITE  
INSTITUTION

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The purpose of this dissertation was to identify and understand the factors that contribute to the degree completion of African American transfer students at a traditionally White institution. Through qualitative methods and a case study design, the current study provides an examination of the educational journey of thirteen, African American recent college graduates. Using semi-structured individual interviews, data from the participants were collected, transcribed, and analyzed drawing from several major theoretical perspectives on college student persistence. Variables examined included interactions with faculty and with peers, racial experiences on campus, and support services offered to transfer students by the institution. Findings indicated that African American transfer students identified strong support networks, confidence in their ability to learn, intrinsic motivation and

having clear educational goals as factors which contributed to their degree completion at a traditionally White institution. Implications for campus policies and practices, as well as recommendations for future research are presented.

THE CASE FOR DEGREE COMPLETION: AFRICAN AMERICAN TRANSFER  
STUDENTS AT A TRADITIONALLY WHITE INSTITUTION

By

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to several individuals who passed away  
during the course of my academic journey.

While your untimely passing shattered my world,  
your memory lives on through me and continues to give me the strength to persevere.

In loving memory of Ernestine Younger,  
Michael D. Montgomery and Cabella Hope Marie Younger

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## CHAPTER I:

### INTRODUCTION

*"In an increasingly competitive world economy, America's economic strength depends upon the education and skills of its workers. In the coming years, jobs requiring at least an associate degree are projected to grow twice as fast as those requiring no college experience. To meet this economic imperative, I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training and set a new national goal: by 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world..." – President Barack Obama*

The current job market suggests that possessing a college degree increases an individual's chance of securing stable employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). The United States Census Bureau (2002) issued a report entitled "The Big Payoff" which found a direct correlation between an individuals' educational attainment and future economic earnings. Moreover, a national study examining individuals earning potential states that a high school graduate will earn an average of \$1.2 million over their lifetime compared to individuals possessing an associate's degree or a bachelor's degree who will earn \$1.6 million and \$2.1 million respectively (Day & Newburger, 2002). In addition to increased earning potential, Lin and Vogt (1996) argue that both economic and social mobility are more likely to occur when an individual possesses a baccalaureate degree. All of these findings suggest that attaining a college degree can significantly increase an individuals' chance for greater employment opportunities, higher future earnings and social mobility.

The work of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also found a direct correlation between one's level of education and their participation in the labor force. They argue that people of color gain even greater occupational benefits from obtaining a bachelor's degree than do Whites (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); however, many



students of color do not attain college degrees at the same rate as their White counterparts (Berkner, He & Forrest Cataldi, 2002; Peter & Forrest Cataldi, 2005). Additionally the number of African Americans and Latinos attaining the baccalaureate does not correspond to their demographic percentage in the United States (Solorzano, Rivas & Velez, 2005).

Low completion rates are troublesome particularly for students of color; but they also indirectly raise sociological concerns. Degree completion often entails both personal and socio-economic benefits for individuals; however, failure to achieve this goal can also mean the loss of an educated citizenry and skilled workforce for the larger society (Porter, 2002). Citing a study conducted by the Institute for Higher Education Policy, Porter (2002) notes “public benefits of attending college include increased tax revenues, greater workplace productivity, increased consumption, increased workforce flexibility and decreased reliance on governmental financial support” (p. 2). As a result, low completion rates are burdensome for both individuals and society at large.

Rendon and Garza (1996) suggest one way to begin addressing concerns about low degree completion rates of students of color is to examine the educational path of transfer students, specifically minority transfer students. They argue that “given the underrepresentation of minorities in the share of baccalaureate degrees earned and that earning the bachelors degree is to a large extent contingent on minorities successfully transferring from two to four year institutions, the imperative to increase transfer rates of minority students should indeed be a national concern” (p. 289). This study examines 13 African American transfer students in an effort to

identify and understand factors contributing to their degree completion at a large, traditionally White institution.

### Description of the Problem

Twenty years ago, most students who chose to pursue higher education often attended a four-year institution immediately following high school, enrolled full-time and ultimately earned their bachelor's degree in four years (Carroll, 1989); however, this no longer describes the most common route for today's students. The pathway to the baccalaureate often varies and is no longer sequential, nor does it always begin and end at the same institution (Anderson, 2003). Increased access to postsecondary education has allowed many students to begin their academic journey at different types of institutions or to attend multiple institutions throughout their collegiate career. National reports indicate that approximately 60% of all undergraduate students attend multiple institutions throughout their collegiate careers (NCES, 2007). Since the 1960's, the number of community colleges have steadily grown, as have the number of students choosing to attend these institutions (Philippe & Patton, 2002). Today, currently 44% of all undergraduate students in the United States now attend community colleges (AACCC, 2009).

As educational options changed so too have the students attending college. Over the past decade, many colleges and universities have become increasingly diverse. The 2008 American Council on Education's (ACE) Minority Status report found that between 1995-2005, there was increase of five percent in the number of minorities attending college compared to a nine percent decrease in attendance of White students (ACE, 2008). The numbers, however, indicate that much of this

increase has been seen at community colleges. Community colleges tend to provide open admissions policies, flexible schedules and reduced costs which result in greater access for a more diverse population of students (Szelenyi, 2001).

For many students of color enrollment at a community college is often their initial pathway to postsecondary education (AACCC, 2009). Previous research indicates that African American students enroll in community colleges at a much higher rate than their White counterparts (Chenoeth, 1998; Nettles, 1998). In the fall of 2005, 40.7% of African American students began their collegiate careers at a community college (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2007). Burdman (2003) suggests that many African Americans realize that beginning their collegiate careers at a community college may in fact increase their chances of successfully transferring to a four-year institution and ultimately attaining their baccalaureate degree.

Laanan (2001) posits the transfer system between two-year and four-year colleges provides an opportunity to create open-access to higher education for a larger, more diversified population of students who would otherwise be ineligible to receive a baccalaureate degree. Lewis and Middleton (2003) support this claim and argue that community colleges are now considered the primary gateway to higher education for many African American students. While articulation agreements and other initiatives have been put in place to help facilitate transfer, African American students attending community colleges do not transfer to four-year institutions, nor do they attain their baccalaureate degree at the same rate as their White counterparts (BPS:96/01). Cohen's (1995) study of minority student transfer rates found that 12.5% of African American students successfully transfer from community colleges

to four-year institutions, compared to 23.4% of their White counterparts.

Additionally, Piland's (1995) research supported Cohen's findings and added that White students who transferred from community colleges not only completed their baccalaureate degrees faster than any other racial group, but they also had the highest graduation rates over time when compared to African American transfer students who had the lowest graduation rates.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify and understand the factors that contribute to the degree completion of African American transfer students at a traditionally White institution. The major research question guiding this study was: What are African American transfer students' perceptions of factors contributing to their degree completion at a large, traditionally White institution? This study also sought to answer the following sub-questions:

1. How do the factors identified in the literature as playing a role in the persistence of African American native students at traditionally White institutions also hold true for African American transfer students?
2. How do African American transfer students describe their transfer experience at a traditionally White institution?

Of the previous studies conducted on transfer students, most have failed to explore students' academic and social experiences after they transfer and matriculate at four-year institutions (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Laanan argues "because of transfer students' diverse backgrounds, more research is warranted to better understand the factors that facilitate or impede their educational success" (Laanan,

2001, p. 343). Much of the research on transfer students focuses on cognitive outcomes of students' adjustment or success at four-year colleges and universities. These studies tend to be quantitative in nature and focus solely on their academic performance at four-year institutions (Cedja, 1997; Gao, Hughes, O'Rear & Fendley, 2002; Rhine, Milligan & Nelson, 2000) or examine the concept of "transfer shock" which suggests that some transfer students experience a decline in their GPA during their first semester after transferring (Hills, 1965). This work fails to examine other factors resulting in transfer students' success such as their co-curricular experiences on campus and/or various institutional factors that may also influence persistence (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Laanan (2004) posits transfer student progress at four-year institutions is linked to their level of involvement; therefore it is imperative to examine both their academic and co-curricular experiences on campus. While all transfer students may have varied experiences on campus, few studies have examined the factors which contribute to the degree completion of transfer students from racial subgroups within the transfer student population, specifically African American transfer students.

This study sought to identify and understand factors contributing to the degree completion of African American transfer students. It examined 13 African American recent college graduates from a large, research university located in the Mid-Atlantic region. Each participant began their collegiate career at community college located within the state prior to transferring to this institution. Variables examined included interactions with faculty and peers, racial experiences on campus, and services provided to transfer students by the institution. Their stories provide an in-depth look

at their experiences as they matriculated at a four-year institution and ultimately completed their baccalaureate degree. This research identifies factors they believe contributed to their degree completion. In so doing, this work adds to our understanding of the needs of African American transfer students.

### Rationale for the Study

One of the primary functions of community colleges has been to prepare students to transfer to four-year institutions (Grubb, 1999; Laanan, 2000). In recent years, the state of Maryland has seen significant increases in the number of students not only attending community colleges, but also transferring to four-year institutions within the state. Approximately 40% of all undergraduates in the state of Maryland attend a community college (Maryland Higher Education Commission, 2003). Additionally, 43% of all African American undergraduates in the state of Maryland are enrolled in a community college (MHEC, 2003). A study conducted by the Maryland Higher Education Commission found that the number of community college transfer students receiving baccalaureate degrees within four years increased over the past ten years to 48.3% (Filipp, 2004). Additionally, the graduation rates and GPA of all minority community college transfer students within the state has also steadily increased.

The graduation rates of African American transfer students have increased to 36.4%, the highest in the state's history; however, it still remains below the average of their non-transfer counterparts in the state of Maryland (Filipp, 2004). Since the number of African American students attending community colleges within the state of Maryland has steadily increased, yet their transfer and graduation rates remain

below average when compared to other transfer and non-transfer students in the state, it is imperative that we examine the experiences of these students to identify factors that increase their chance of successfully attaining their baccalaureate degree.

### Research Design

Qualitative methodology was used for this study to examine the experiences of African American transfer students who recently graduated from a traditionally White institution. Individual interviews were used as the primary instrument to gather data. Participants were asked about their experiences after they transferred to this university and to identify what factors they perceived as having contributed to their degree completion.

A single-case study design was used to address the research questions. This study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) case study structure: the problem, the context, the issues, and the "lessons learned." In this particular study, the *problem*, according to the literature, is that African American transfer students do not attain their baccalaureate degree at the same rate as their White counterparts (BPS:96/01; Cohen, 1995; Piland, 1995). This may be influenced by a number of factors including the institution, difficulty in adjusting to a new academic environment, academic preparation and their social and academic experiences (Laanan, 2001, 2003; Townsend, 1995; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). The *context* is a large research university located in the Mid-Atlantic region and 13 recent African American college graduates who began their academic careers at a community college. Many of the *issues* were identified in advance and informed by the literature, while others were

introduced by the participants in response to the interview questions. Finally, the *lessons learned* were determined based on the findings at the conclusion of this study.

This research was informed by three theoretical frameworks. Each framework added important variables identified in the literature as important to transfer students and African American students. The three frameworks include: Padilla's Model of Minority Student Success, Bean and Metzner's Nontraditional Student Attrition Model and Sedlacek's Noncognitive Variables. Padilla's Local Model of Minority Student Success (1997) examines strategies employed by successful minority students to overcome barriers in college. These barriers include: discontinuity, lack of nurturing, lack of presence and resource barriers, all four of which were explored within this study. The work of Bean and Metzner (1985) was utilized as a means to examine the role environmental variables such as family and the institution have on transfer students' persistence. This model was also used to examine personal variables influencing student departure such as participants' educational goals and their parents' educational status. Lastly, an exploration of noncognitive variables was considered based on the work of Sedlacek and Brooks (1976). Although their work identified seven noncognitive variables which influence the persistence and graduation rates of African American students, only two were explored in this study based on the population under examination, they include: realistic self-appraisal and the need for a strong support person (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976). All three bodies of work were considered and ultimately helped illuminate the experiences of African American transfer students at a traditionally White, four-year institution. However, Padilla's model is most strongly present in the findings and analysis. Further



examination of all three bodies of research will take place within the review of the literature.

### Significance of the Study

Since there is a limited amount of literature that explores the experiences of transfer students, particularly African American transfer students, a study like this has many implications for campus policy. First, these findings can help institutions better serve the transfer student population by identifying and understanding the factors that they believe contribute to their degree completion. Secondly, after reviewing current university policies regarding this population, institutions may also use these findings to determine whether their policies have had a positive or negative influence on the degree completion of their transfer students. Lastly, this study provides qualitative data to extend our understanding of the trends identified in larger statistical studies and data sets regarding transfer student persistence and degree completion.

While we know that African American transfer students fail to attain their baccalaureate degree at the same rate as their White counterparts, we do not necessarily know why, nor do we know how these students' describe their experiences on a particular campus. These findings will help fill in pieces of the transfer puzzle by providing answers to these questions through an examination of students' experiences. Understanding the factors that contribute to the degree completion of African American transfer students may provide four-year institutions with the tools needed to create an educational environment that can support and nurture all transfer students. Additionally, the findings from this study may ultimately lead to the development of a comprehensive transfer model for this particular campus

which assists in developing the proper resources and services tailored to meet the specific needs of African American transfer students.

### Definition of Key Terms

The following section provides definitions of several frequently used terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader, but are often germane to the transfer experience. It is important to note that throughout this study, unless otherwise stated, students who transferred from a community college are the object of the discussion. In some cases, researchers discuss “transfer students” and may be referring to any student who transfers to a four-year institution; however, this research focuses specifically on “vertical transfer” which refers to students who transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution, as opposed to “horizontal or reverse transfer” which refers to students transferring from another four-year institution or from a four-year institution to a community college.

The term “transfer” refers to the movement of a student from one postsecondary institution to another (Cuseo, 1998). This term is often used to describe students who begin their postsecondary education at a community college with the goal of eventually obtaining a baccalaureate degree from a four-year institution. The term “native student” refers to a student who has not attended a previous college or university as a degree seeking student prior to entering their present four-year institution (Cohen & Brawer, 2003) and begins their collegiate careers at the same institution in which he/she is currently enrolled. Conversely, the term “transfer student” refers to a student who seeks admission to a college or university after previously attending another institution, most often a community college. For the

purpose of this study, the researcher will use the definition of “transfer student” that is provided by the institution being studied. The institution defines a transfer student as “an individual who has graduated from high school and subsequently completed at least 12 semester hours at a regionally accredited college or university, usually a community college located in the state” (UMCP, 2007).

Throughout this study, the student participants will be referred to as “African American.” These individuals were born in the United States, are of African descent and identify themselves as such. It is also assumed that these individuals’ ancestors were brought to America involuntarily (Ogbu, 1992). It should be noted, that in this particular study, the term “African American” may be used interchangeably with the term “Black.” Lastly, the term “traditionally White institutions” or “TWI’s” refers to those colleges and universities that were traditionally founded to serve the majority population. The term “TWI” will be used throughout this study as opposed to “PWI” unless otherwise quoted from previous research. While past research has often referred to these institutions as predominantly White institutions or “PWI’s,” current demographic trends indicate a shift at institutions of higher education which includes a significant influx of students of color, therefore the majority population on campuses may no longer be comprised of White students. Therefore, this study will use the term “traditionally White institutions” or “TWI’s” as their population prior to this influx was traditionally comprised by a majority of White students.

## CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter examines the framework that guided the inquiry of this study, as well as a review of the literature pertinent to the population examined. What follows is a synthesis of the research conducted on community college transfer students, the nature of the transfer student experience and factors influencing their degree completion. The chapter begins with an overview of two traditional college impact models and their applicability to the population examined in this study. The traditional models discussed include Tinto's Model of College Student Departure (1987, 1993) and Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984, 1999). Some critiques of these models, particularly Tinto's, suggest that they may not be applicable to students of color (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997; Rendon, Jalomo & Nora, 2000) or non-traditional students (Tierney, 1992); therefore, additional models were considered when developing a framework by which to examine African American transfer students. Those models include: Padilla's Model of Minority Student Success, Bean and Metzner's Model of Non-Traditional Student Attrition and Sedlacek's Noncognitive Variables in Predicting Academic Success. All three will be discussed in greater detail at the end of this chapter.

The next section of this chapter reviews extant literature on community college transfer students and African American college students. It begins with a brief review of the literature on African American college students attending traditionally White institutions. Factors influencing the persistence of African American college students are also addressed. Because there is a limited amount of research which

focuses on African American transfer students exclusively, a brief review of the literature on African American students in general was needed to provide some parallels between African American native students and African American transfer students. This discussion is followed by an examination of research conducted on transfer students including a description of the community college transfer student population. Next I examine the academic and co-curricular experiences of transfer students and how each influences persistence and degree completion.

Lastly, a review of research on minority transfer students is presented. While there is a significant body of literature pertaining to African American college students and an expanding body of knowledge focusing on transfer students, very little research has been conducted on minority transfer students or African American transfer students specifically. However, this section highlights the work of Wawrynski and Sedlacek (2003) which is one of the most recent, comprehensive studies on transfer students as it explores the experiences and expectations of this group by race and gender. Since there is a dearth of literature which examines African American transfer students exclusively, this section also emphasizes the need for additional research which explores the various subgroups within the transfer student population.

#### Traditional Models and their Applicability to Transfer Students

This literature review begins with an examination of two traditional models, one focusing on student persistence and the other on student involvement, and examines their applicability to African American transfer students. Because the literature on transfer students is in its infancy compared to research on native students

(Alpern, 2000), it was necessary to briefly review these traditional models as a prototype by which to begin examining other student populations. The models considered include: Tinto's Model of College Student Departure (1987, 1993) which explores reasons students chose to depart from an institution and Astin's (1984,1999) Theory of Student Involvement which examines the level of involvement of students and its relationship to student learning, development and persistence.

Historically, much of the earlier research on transfer students only asked questions focusing on academic performance such as how are they performing at the four-year institution, what was their GPA both before and after transfer or how do they compare academically to their native counterparts (Best & Gehring, 1993; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Cedja, 1997; Davies & Casey, 1999; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Graham & Hughes, 1994; Keeley & House, 1993). These studies rarely apply a theoretical framework by which to examine transfer student adjustment or success (Laanan, 2004). Townsend's (1995) work was not only among the first line of qualitative research on transfer students, but also among the first to explore traditional models as a potential theoretical framework by which to examine this population. Much of Townsend's research is grounded in literature on college student persistence, despite the fact that many of the traditional persistence models were intended for native, traditional aged students, not transfers. She employed Tinto's model (1993) of college student departure to examine how transfer students become both social and academically integrated at their new institution. Similarly as research on transfer student advanced, Laanan (2004) acknowledged the lack of theoretical perspectives used in transfer studies. While developing the Laanan-Transfer Students'

Questionnaire to understand the adjustment process of transfer students, he formulated a theoretical perspective based on Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (Laanan, 2004). His findings suggest that transfer students who become involved in "social, academic and extracurricular" activities will have a positive adjustment to their new environment (Laanan, 2004, p. 335). The following section synthesizes the work of both Tinto (1987) and Astin (1993) and considers their applicability to the population examined in this study.

#### *Tinto's Model of College Student Departure*

Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) Model on College Student Departure is most often referenced when trying to explain student departure (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000). Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) theory sought to explain the factors that influence the persistence of college students. He posits students begin their postsecondary journey already possessing certain attributes which influence the departure process. These attributes include: family background, skills and abilities, and prior educational background. Additionally he argues that a students' academic and social experiences within the institution, both formal and informal, as well as their individual goals and commitment also influence a student's decision to remain or depart from an institution (Tinto, 1987).

Tinto's (1987) theory draws on the work of Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage, which includes a three stage process of separation, transition and incorporation. He argued that students must advance through these three stages in order to successfully integrate into the college environment. Tinto suggests that in order for students to successfully transition to their new collegiate environment they

must separate themselves from their old groups and affiliations to become part of the new group. This process also requires them to gain new knowledge and skills through various rituals which will assist them in becoming better acclimated to their new environment.

Much of the critique of Tinto's work argues that his theory does not fully address the unique needs of students of color and is not applicable to students from diverse backgrounds (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997; Rendon, Jalomo & Nora, 2000). Braxton disagreed with Tinto's assumption for students of color that "the values and beliefs rooted in his or her cultural background must be abandoned to successfully incorporate the values and beliefs of the institution into which they are attempting to integrate" (Braxton, 2004, p. 132). He and others dispute this notion and have often criticized the work of Tinto because of this premise therefore challenging the applicability and effectiveness of Tinto's Model for students of color (Rendon, Jaloma & Nora, 2000).

#### *Tinto's Model and Transfer Students*

Several qualitative studies examining the experiences of transfer students have used Tinto's Theory of College Student Departure (1987, 1993) as part of their theoretical or conceptual framework (Townsend, McNerney & Arnold, 1993; Townsend, 1995; Townsend, 2006). Many of these studies focus on the segment of Tinto's work which explores Van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage. While Tinto's argues that "virtually all students experience some difficulty in making the transition to college", the details of this transition and the difficulties some students face during this transition are not included in his theory (Tinto, 1993, p. 98). He did, however,



acknowledge that while his theory is based on traditional students transitioning from high school directly to college that transfer students “are [also] likely to experience problems of separation, transition, and incorporation, but they may do so in ways that may be qualitatively different from those experienced by young high school graduates” (Tinto, 1988, p. 452).

In Tinto’s later work (1993) he suggests that transfer students face numerous obstacles upon transferring to four-year institutions and experience difficulty becoming integrated to their new environment as do most first-time students, but often with fewer resources. Laanan (1996) however, noted that transfer students simply “may not be prepared socially and psychologically for the change in the environment from the community college to a four-year college or university” (p. 83). Tinto (1993) did ultimately conclude that it is the responsibility of four-year institutions to foster integration and enhance transfer students sense of belonging in order to help them persist and that when transfer students find the institutional support they need they are more likely to succeed and attain their baccalaureate degree. While some of Tinto’s arguments may apply to the transfer student population, his primary focus remained on traditional aged college students at four-year institutions. As his theory evolved and was revised over time to explore other student populations, it still fails to fully capture the experiences of students moving from one institution to another.

#### *Astin’s Theory on Student Involvement*

Astin’s (1999) theory, originally published in 1984, argues that involvement in both the academic and social aspects of the collegiate experience can influence

students' development and learning. He hypothesized, "the greater the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal growth" (p. 307). Astin's (1984) defines involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). His theory posits that the likelihood that a student will persist is greater when they are presented with more opportunities to become involved in their collegiate environment. Additionally, he argues that students who are "involved" often devote a significant amount of time and energy to both academic and co-curricular activities such as interacting with faculty, participating in social clubs and organizations and attending events on campus.

Astin (1999) asserts that involvement can be measured both quantitatively based on the time spent on a particular event or activity and qualitatively, depending on the level of involvement or participation by the student. Astin (1996) also suggests that every student's level of involvement will differ based on the individual. Additionally, his I-E-O model (input, environment, output) suggests that the college environment also plays a role in student satisfaction and persistence (Astin, 1993). Using the I-E-O model he posits the students input will interact with the environment to produce a certain outcome. For example, the student and any pre-entry characteristics they possess prior to arriving on campus, will interact in some way with their new collegiate environment and ultimately produce a result or output such as student learning and satisfaction with their collegiate experiences. He concluded that the more a student is involved, the more likely they are to persist (Astin, 1984, 1999).

### *Astin's Theory and Transfer Students*

While Astin's theory was not intended to address involvement or persistence of transfer students, the implications for this population are evident. Laanan (2004) suggests "if community college transfer students are involved in their social and academic activities at the two- and four-year levels, they will more likely experience a successful or positive academic and social adjustment at the senior institution" (p. 33). This however, continues to be a cause for concern as prior research (Townsend 1993, 1995) argues that transfer students often have difficulty becoming involved once they transfer to a new institution. Zamani (2001) also found that transfer students are often confronted with additional issues such as difficulty adjusting to their new environment, establishing relationships with faculty and peers and finding on-campus housing which can also impact their level of involvement and negatively influence their persistence.

Astin's Theory (1999) also addresses the issue of "non-involvement" which can "either isolate the student from peers or remove the student physically from the campus" (Astin, 1996, p. 126). He suggests factors such as "living at home, commuting, attending part-time, being employed off campus, being employed full-time, and watching television" can all contribute to a student not being involved (p. 126). Many of the factors are often characteristics of transfer students. If this notion is in fact true, the application of Astin's theory may infer that transfer students who do not become involved may have a lesser chance of persisting or having a successful, satisfying collegiate experience. While Astin's theory does not speak to transfer students exclusively, it does provide a greater understanding of factors which can

enhance or impede student persistence and satisfaction with their collegiate experience.

### Summary of Traditional Models

Both Tinto (1987) and Astin's (1993) theories suggest that involvement in campus activities and integration to the campus environment are key factors in college student persistence and success. However, Townsend (1993) observed that most four-year colleges and universities are less likely to integrate transfer students into the academic and social networks on campus. Attempting to fully apply either of these theories to this particular population suggests that transfer students inability or failure to become involved or integrated to campus can have a negative impact on their persistence. Additionally, Townsend (1995) found that transfer students had fewer opportunities and were often less willing to integrate themselves into the social system of four-year colleges and universities, often due to their commuter status. This too would suggest that according to traditional persistence models and previous research conducted on transfer students that they are more likely have a less positive collegiate experience than their non-transfer counterparts.

While these traditional models examined the persistence and involvement of college students, neither exclusively addresses the specific needs of transfer students per se, nor do they identify factors contributing to the degree completion of the particular subgroup (e.g. African American transfer students) examined in this study. Although each of these models were reviewed in an effort to begin examining factors influencing persistence and degree completion for a specific student population, they

were not directly employed in this study due to their lack of applicability to the population under study.

### Framework of the Study

This study built an integrated framework that incorporates elements from three theoretical models. The models considered for this study include: Padilla's Model for Minority Student Success, Bean and Metzner's Non-Traditional Student Attrition Model and Sedlacek's Non-Cognitive Variables Predicting Academic Success by Race. All three models not only assisted in the development of the framework that guided this study, but also helped in the creation the interview protocol and aided in the analysis of data.

Padilla's model (1991, 1997) examines barriers that minority students must overcome in order to be successful in college. This model was useful as it is also situated within a local context and emphasizes the need to attain knowledge specific to the particular institution being examined. Bean and Metzner's (1985) Model explores variables which influence the departure of nontraditional students from college. This model helped to inform this study by identifying variables affecting nontraditional students, many of whom possess similar traits of, or may also be, transfer students. Lastly, the model developed by Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) initially identified seven noncognitive variables used to predict academic success for minority students. This model was considered because it explores variables specific to students of color attending a traditionally White institution which is the setting in which this research is situated.

By integrating various aspects of these three models, this study explored social, academic, cultural and institutional variables and their impact on degree completion for African American transfer students. Although the variables presented in these models are relevant to this research, these models were not replicated in this study. Rather than testing these models or applying each of them as a lens to examine the experiences of these students, each had certain elements or factors that were identified in the literature as pertinent to transfer students; therefore, they were used a backdrop to help guide the analysis of the experiences of the participants in this study and to assist in the interpretation of the findings. The following sections will briefly describe each model, discuss the components used to develop this framework and address how they are applicable to the target population of this study.

#### Padilla's Local Model of Minority Student Success

Padilla's Model of Minority Student Success (1991, 1997) explores the strategies that successful students of color used to overcome barriers in college. As opposed to identifying the factors that caused student departure, this model examines the practices which contributed to the success of minority students, including the acquisition of theoretical and "heuristic" knowledge. Padilla's model argues that in addition to theoretical knowledge which is acquired in the classroom, students must also acquire "a certain amount of heuristic, or practical, knowledge that is necessary to function competently on campus" (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez & Trevino, 1997, p. 126). The model is based on Harmon & King's (1985) expertise system, which suggests that heuristic knowledge is acquired through various experiences and is "passed along informally from experienced students to new students or by a student

organization to groups of new students” (Padilla et al., 1997, p. 127). Padilla argues that students must acquire both theoretical and heuristic knowledge in order to successfully navigate the collegiate system and that some, in fact, become “experts” in being successful at a specific college or university (Padilla et al., 1997).

This model submits that most students of color must actively seek out resources and create their own support networks in order to overcome barriers that interfere with their persistence. The model presents four barriers students of color need to overcome in order to be successful on a college campus which included: discontinuity, lack of nurturing, lack of presence and resource barriers. Discontinuity refers to any obstacles that may hinder the smooth transition of minority students to the collegiate environment. Lack of nurturing and lack of presence addresses the absence of various support networks on campus and the absence of a substantial minority presence on campus among students, faculty and staff. Lastly, resource barriers refer to the lack of monies available, specifically the difficulties related to the financial aid process.

Padilla’s Local Model of Minority Student Success (1997) is relevant to this study because it shifts the persistence paradigm from a deficit approach to a success model. Unlike previous research that examined factors that impede student success, Padilla’s model explores successful measures that students employed to navigate the collegiate system, thereby increasing their persistence. This particular model is also normed on the experiences of minority students in a local context which is similar to this study in that it focuses on the experiences of African American transfer students within a specific institution.

Many of the barriers identified in this model are similar to those found in existing literature on transfer students (Herman & Lewis, 2004; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Zamani, 2001); therefore using this particular success model helped to create a new lens by which to identify and understand factors contributing to the degree completion of African American transfer students. When developing the interview protocol for this study, all four barriers presented in this model were considered. Subsequently, participants were asked about obstacles that hindered their transition from the community college to the four-year institution. Additionally, they were also asked how they received information about various programs and services offered to transfer students and to discuss their relationships with faculty and staff at the four-year institution.

#### Bean and Metzner's Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition

Bean and Metzner's Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition Model (1985) was designed to examine the departure of non-traditional students. They defined a non-traditional student as "someone who is older than twenty-four, or does not live in a campus residence and is therefore a commuter or a part-time student, or some combination of these three factors; is not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution and is chiefly concerned with the institutions' academic offerings" (p. 489). The majority of transfer students are often classified as non-traditional students because many of them meet these criteria.

Bean and Metzner (1985) examined 624 non-traditional, first-year students at a university located in the Midwestern region. They identified four sets of variables which influence students' decisions to depart. These variables include: college GPA,



students' intent to stay or leave the institution, academic (high school performance) and personal background (age and race/ethnicity), and environmental variables. Contrary to most departure models which focus on traditionally-aged students, they placed less emphasis on social integration and more emphasis on environmental variables. Bean and Metzner (1985) argued that environmental variables have a direct impact on non-traditional students' departure decisions and that various factors at a particular institution may influence student persistence. Their model suggests that factors external to the institution can also play a major role in affecting both attitudes and decisions of nontraditional students (Cabrera, et al., 1992). These environmental variables included: finances, employment, family, support, and future plans which included opportunity to transfer to another institution. Additionally, Bean and Metzner (1985) identified psychological factors that can influence student attrition which included: commitment to goals, stress, expectations and self-esteem (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Bean and Metzner's Model (1985) is relevant to this study because it examines a non-traditional student population of which some transfer students belong. This model suggests that the previous models which helped lay the foundation for the study of student departure (Pascarella, 1980; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975) must be revised so that they include non-traditional students. Additionally, this model posits that social integration may only play a small role in student retention and other factors, particularly environmental variables such as the institution, finances, employment, and family responsibilities, must also be taken into to account

when examining non-traditional students. The use of this model was also appropriate given the non-traditional student population it examined.

Elements of the Bean and Metzner model were also used to help develop the interview protocol. Based on several of the environmental factors described in this model, participants were asked to share via the demographic questionnaire, information about their employment status, the educational status of their parents and future academic and career goals. Additionally, the psychological factors identified in this model were useful when examining the data as participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of factors contributing to their degree completion and how they viewed their journey from the community college to the four-year institution.

#### Non-Cognitive Variables

Sedlacek and Brook's (1976) reviewed the literature regarding the persistence of college students and found the rate of persistence for African American students to be significantly lower than their White counterparts and even lower for those African Americans attending predominantly White institutions (Astin, 1975, 1978, 1982; Sedlacek & Pelham, 1976). Based on these findings they concluded that a different set of variables influence the persistence or graduation rates of African American students than those for Whites. They identified the following as the non-cognitive variables that influence success for African American students: "positive self-concept, realistic self-appraisal, understanding of and ability to deal with racism, preference of long range goals over more immediate short term needs, availability of a strong support person, successful leadership experiences, and demonstrated community service" (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985).

This body of work was an appropriate theory to apply when examining African American transfer students. Because their work focuses on the persistence of African American students, particularly those attending predominantly White institutions, it provided a deeper lens to examine both student and institutional data, such as the number of African American admitted to the institution and their rate of completion. Additionally, since the premise of this study was to identify and understand factors that contributed to the degree completion of African American transfer students, this research served as a prototype to examine the persistence of a group of students based on race and explore the impact of campus culture and climate and the affect attending a predominantly White institution can have on African American students.

Several of Sedlacek and Brooks' (1976) variables were deemed appropriate when examining African American transfer students; however, only two of the proposed seven variables were considered for this study. The first variable considered was realistic self-appraisal. Because the participants in this study were transfer students from a different institution, it was important to know how they viewed themselves and if they in fact believed they were ready and had been adequately prepared by their previous school to transfer and attend a large, four-year institution. In an effort to explore these two variables, participants were asked when and why they decided to transfer to this particular institution and if they believed the community college prepared them academically for a four-year institution. The second variable emphasized the need for a strong support person was also useful for this framework as participants were asked to identify both a person and/or an office

that provided guidance and support for them both during and after the transfer process.

### Summary of Framework

Since the vast majority of the literature examining degree completion or persistence does not specifically address African American transfer students, the framework for this study combined pertinent components from each model that apply to the experiences of African American transfer students. This framework also helped inform the interview protocol, the analysis of the data collected for this study, and provided greater insight into factors that contributed to the degree completion of this particular subgroup within the transfer student population. Sedlacek and Brooks' (1976) non-cognitive variables helped in the formulation of the interview protocol and the examination of data reported by students in this study. Because this work centered specifically on African American students at predominantly White institutions, it also provided a set of environmental variables to consider when examining this subgroup within the transfer student population. Padilla's (1997) entire model was useful in helping to develop questions that examined students' perceptions of campus support networks available and strategies the participants used to learn how to navigate the collegiate system. Finally, elements of the Bean and Metzner Model helped to provide a lens by which to examine external or "environmental" factors such as employment, family and educational goals and how they impacted the degree completion of these students.

Table 2.1

*Framework of the Study*

Models	Elements of Model Examined	Examples of Corresponding Interview Questions
<i>Sedlacek's Noncognitive Variables</i>	<p>Realistic Self-Appraisal</p> <p>**On the demographic questionnaire, participants were asked to list their educational goals prior to transfer, as well as their plans following graduation.</p> <p>Strong support person</p>	<p>If you had to do it all over again would you have chosen to start at community college?</p> <p>Discuss your relationships with individuals within the campus community. Which individuals were most helpful to you throughout your college experience?</p>
<i>Padilla's Model of Minority Student Success</i>	<p>Barriers to overcome:</p> <p>Obstacles that may hinder smooth transition to collegiate environment.</p> <p>Lack of nurturing or presence of support networks</p> <p>Absence of substantial "minority" or other like type community on campus</p> <p>Difficulty with campus processes such as financial aid, admissions, etc.</p>	<p>Do you believe there is a stigma associated with attending or transferring from a community college? If so, how is this stigma manifested?</p> <p>Describe the members of your peer group. Are they also transfer students?</p> <p>Describe your experiences as an African American student on this campus.</p> <p>What techniques or strategies did you use to navigate the collegiate system?</p>
<i>Bean &amp; Metzner's Non-Traditional Student Attrition Model</i>	<p>Environmental Variables (finances, employment, family, support and future plans).</p> <p>Personal Background (age, race).</p> <p>**Additional background information was gathered from participants via the demographic questionnaire (Appendix C)</p>	<p>How would you describe the UMCP campus environment as it relates to transfer students?</p> <p>If you were advising a fellow African American student at a 2 yr college about transferring to UMCP, what would you tell him or her?</p>

## African American College Students

While there is a significant amount of literature which examines African American college students and an increase in the number of studies examining transfer students, there is very little which focuses exclusively on African American transfer students. One of the questions this study sought to answer is how the factors identified in the literature as influencing the persistence of African American students also hold true for African American transfer students. In an effort to answer this question, it was important to examine the factors in the literature on African American students as well as transfer students, not only to identify characteristics unique to each population, but also to have a better understanding of the dual identities they hold being both an African American student at a traditionally White institution and a transfer student.

### *African American Students Attending TWI's*

In the late 1960's and early 70's there was a significant increase in the number of African American students enrolling in traditionally White institutions (Allen, 1985; Fleming, 1984; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976). Despite the increase in enrollment, many of these students experienced difficulty becoming academically and socially integrated into their new environment and often expressed feelings of alienation, discrimination and loneliness while attending these institutions (Allen, 1985; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Feagin, 1992; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; James, 1998; Nettles, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Much of the earlier research which examined African American students found that they encounter academic, social and cultural issues that are more

pronounced when they attend traditionally White institutions (Jay & D'Augelli, 1991; Nottingham, Rosen & Parks, 1992; Sedlacek, 1987; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). Through the years as others began examining African American students they found that these students continue to face challenges while attending TWIs (Benton, 2001; Cokley, 2000; Cuyjet, 1998; Grant & Breese, 1997; James, 1998; Swim et al., 2003). Many of their issues were related, but not limited to difficulty adjusting to a new environment (Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002; Smedley, Myers & Harrell, 1993), negative perceptions of their campus racial climate (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella & Hagedorn, 1999; Cuyjet, 1998; Grant & Breese, 1997; Nora & Cabrera, 1996), and lower academic performance (Chavous, Rivas, Green & Helaire, 2002; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2006; Wallace & Bell, 1999). Additional research suggest that limited interactions with faculty, poor institutional fit and lack of support also contribute to the negative experiences of some African American students on traditionally White campuses (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Davis, 1994; Mow & Nettles, 1990; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1987; Turner, 1994; Holmes et al., 2000).

Previous studies argued that the campus environment plays a significant role in the collegiate experience of African American students attending TWIs (Cuyjet, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Swim et al., 2003; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004). Many students of color attending these institutions often report experiencing a lack of support or feeling unwelcomed and often discriminated against in their new environment (Allen, 1992; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn & Terenzini, 1996; Person & Christensen, 1996; Saddlemire, 1996; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993;

Schwitzer, Griffin, Ancis & Thomas, 1999). Researchers submit that because these students do not feel as though they receive support from the institution they often perform poorly and fail to persist (Nottingham, Rosen & Parks, 1992). Others report that African American students are forced to become acclimated into a community that is often unprepared and unwilling to accept them and their cultural differences which often leads to greater anxiety and discomfort for these students (Fields, 1991; Fries-Britt, 1998; Jones, 1997). These feelings are not uncommon and are often compounded as many African American students struggle with adapting to a traditionally White environment (Patton, 2006).

Additional research has explored African American students' perceptions of racism and discrimination and found that many students believe that they receive lower grades and are treated unfair by faculty because of their race (Allen, 1988; Engber, 2004; Feagin, 1994; Holmes et al., 2002; Nettles, 1988; Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan & Andrews-Guillen, 2003). Studies also found that African American students felt as though they were often ignored or not thought of as a priority on traditionally White campuses (Carter, 2001; Solorzana, Ceja & Yosso, 2001; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). In Cabrera and Nora's (1994) study on college students' perceptions, they described minority students' feelings of "noninvolvement with or estrangement from the institution brought on by a sense of meaningless and powerlessness" (p. 388). They associated these feelings with an institutional environment that does not accept the values and/or behaviors of the different subcultures of the campus (Cabrera & Nora, 1994). In 1999, Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella & Hagedorn also explored students' perceptions and the impact



of campus racial climate on the adjustment of African American students compared to White college students. They found that perceptions of prejudice and discrimination negatively influenced African American students' decision to persist. Ultimately, they concluded that "exposure to a campus climate of prejudice and intolerance lessens commitment to the institution and, indirectly, weakens decisions to persist" (Cabrera, 1999, p. 153).

While the academic performance of African American students and its relationship to student persistence has been explored in previous studies, much of it has focused on their lower performance when compared to their White counterparts (Allen, 1985; Fleming, 1984; Nettles, 1988). However, there has been an increase in the number of studies which now examine the success and high achievement of African American students (Fries-Britt, 1997, 1998; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Grandy, 1998; Griffin, 2006; Harper, 2004, 2006, 2008). Several studies suggest that a major factor contributing to lower performance of African American students is the perception of being stereotyped based on race (Hummel & Steele, 1996; Steele, 1995). Fries-Britt and Turner (2001) explored the academic, social and racial experiences of African American students attending a predominantly White institution. They argued "the introduction of a stereotype takes up space in a students' thinking process and eventually chips away at their performance and ability" (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001, p. 425). Based on their findings, they concluded that stereotypes based on students behaviors or physical appearance often had a negative impact on students' academic performance. Additional studies reveal that many African American students not only struggle with being stereotyped, particularly by

White faculty members, but they also report feeling as though they have been designated the representative or spokesperson for their entire race (Cleveland, 2004; Feagin, 1992; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Gurin & Nagda, 2006; Margolis & Romero, 1998; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Solorzano et al., 2001; Swim et al., 2003; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003). These feelings often cause additional discomfort, particularly in the classroom, and can have a negative impact on their academic performance.

#### *Summary on African American College Students*

While all college students may experience challenges when they arrive on campus, some suggest that the needs of African American students are unique and often differ greatly from those of their White counterparts (Benton, 2001; Cuyjet, 1998; Fleming, 1984; Grant & Breese, 1997; James, 1998; Nettles, 1988). Similar to the findings of African American students attending TWI's, many transfer students also face challenges when arriving on campus. Difficulty adjusting to their new collegiate environment, perceptions of discrimination and/or differential treatment and concerns about lower academic performance are often prevalent for both African American college students and African American transfer students.

Smith (1981) concludes that "black students attending white universities are often caught in a whirlwind of confusing racial identities" (p. 301). While the literature on African American college students helps provide a better understanding of factors that may influence degree completion at a traditionally White institution, the participants in this current study share a unique, dual identity. These individuals are not only African American students who attended a traditionally White institution, but they are also transfer students. The following section addresses the other half of

the participants' identity by examining the literature on community college transfer students. It begins with a discussion of these students' pre-matriculation characteristics and then goes on to address issues specific to the transfer student population and the challenges they face once they transfer from a community college to a four-year institution. It concludes with a discussion of the few studies which explore the racial subgroups within this student population.

### Community College Transfer Students

The transfer function has become very important in the American higher education system by providing students with the opportunity to enter four-year colleges and universities when they may not be able or eligible to enter directly out of high school (Laanan, 2001). Moreover, as tuition continues to increase yearly at many campuses, the two-year route to the baccalaureate has become an even more popular option for many students who simply cannot afford to attend a four-year institution (Cejda, 1997). Consequently, many community colleges are now seeing an increase in enrollment of students who enter with the intent to later transfer to a four-year institution (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; McCormick & Carroll, 1997; Phillippe, 2002). This creates a greater need for services at both the community college and at four-year institutions to help students with this transition. Despite the increase in students desiring to transfer, there have been a limited number of studies on transfer students when compared to those of native, traditional aged students (Alpern, 2000). Laanan (2001) suggests that research should not be limited to the comparison of these two groups, but rather an examination of transfer students as their own unique population. He argues that examining the experiences of transfer students will lead to a greater

understanding of both the student and their needs upon arriving at a four-year institution (Laanan, 2001). The following section provides a review of the literature on community college transfer students and explores factors influencing their degree completion.

### *Who are Transfer Students?*

Transfer students are often defined as those students who began their collegiate career at one institution then transferred to another (Keeley & House, 1993). Unlike traditional students who begin and end their collegiate careers at the same institution, transfer students take a different path to the baccalaureate degree, often beginning at a community college.

Currently community colleges enroll nearly half of all undergraduate students in the United States (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005). Students attending community colleges have become increasingly more diverse over the years and tend vary by age, race and socioeconomic status (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Many of these students currently attending community colleges are students of color, come from low-income families and are often first generation college students (AACC, 2009). Students choosing to attend community colleges do so for a variety of reasons including preparing to transfer to a four-year institution and ultimately attaining their baccalaureate (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Coley, 2000; VanDerLinden, 2002). Researchers have found that more than half of the students beginning at a community college indicate that they plan to transfer and ultimately complete the necessary requirements to attain a bachelors degree (Berkner et al, 2002); however, only about a quarter of those students are actually successful in transferring to four-

year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; McCormick & Carroll, 1997; Phillippe, 2000). Additionally, transfer rates are even lower among students of color when compared to their White counterparts attending community colleges (Hagedorn, Moon, Cypers, Maxwell & Lester, 2006).

Cohen & Brawer (2003) argued that students who possessed similar traits of traditional students were more likely to persist at community colleges and successfully transfer to a four-year institution. Their study found that similar to native students, transfer students who were enrolled full-time, under the age of 24 and came from higher socioeconomic backgrounds had higher transfer and graduation rates (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Similarly when Berkner, He, Forrest and Cataldi (2002) examined the BPS-96/01 cohort, they found that students with greater risks such as being enrolled part-time, working full-time, having family obligations and those not continuously enrolled were less likely transfer to from a community college to a four-year institution.

### *Challenges for Transfer Students*

Transfer students often encounter academic, social and psychological challenges as they make the transition from community colleges to four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dowd, 2003; Laanan, 2001, 2003; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). In an effort to address these challenges, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) joined forces to “identify nonfinancial barriers to baccalaureate access, make recommendations to remove such barriers, and implement solutions” to assist students desiring to transfer (Access Project, 2004, p. vii). In

2004, they published a report of their findings entitled “Improving Access to the Baccalaureate” which identified five nonfinancial barriers which impede transfer student success. These barriers included “the non-traditional profile of community college students; differing academic missions and institution capacity issues; faculty attitudes perceptions at sending and receiving institutions, inadequate advising and student support services and existing state and system policies” (Access Project, 2004, p. 4). Based on the findings of this report, one of the conclusions drawn is that both community colleges and four-year institutions must make a genuine commitment to transfer students and work towards creating an easy, seamless transfer process in order to eliminate barriers to the baccalaureate (Access Project, 2004). Although this may be true, Townsend (1993) noted that four-year institutions often show less attention to transfer students despite the fact that this population sometimes has a more difficult time becoming integrated into the campus environment than native students.

Additional research suggests one of the primary challenges for transfer students often comes from having to adjust to a new campus culture that is different than the community college from which they previously attended (Laanan, 1996, 2001; Townsend, 1995; Townsend, McNerny & Arnold, 1993). The “open door, supportive, second chance institutional culture” of the community college is often different from that of a four-year institution (Access Project, 2004). Differences between these institutions can include “size, location, difficulty of curriculum, and competition among students” (Laanan, 1996, p. 69). Townsend and Wilson (2006) examined the experiences of community college transfer students attending a large,

research university and found that because community colleges and four-year institutions differ significantly, transfer students often reported feelings of stress and frustration upon transfer. They concluded that these feelings not only impact the way a student feels about themselves and the institution after they have transferred, but they can also negatively influence persistence (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Community colleges are often criticized for not preparing transfers students for what they may encounter upon arriving at a four-year institution (Graham & Hughes, 1994; Kinnick & Kempner, 1988). Most often, transfer students are faced with greater expectations in the classroom and more rigorous course loads upon transfer, therefore experience difficulty adjusting academically (Keeley & House, 1993; Townsend, 1995). Townsend (1995) argued that faculty at community colleges are often forced to spend more time focusing on students who are struggling academically that they fail to encourage and challenge those who are performing well. As a result, some studies have found that transfer students are not prepared for the academic challenges they are presented with at four-year institutions and therefore do not perform as well upon initial enrollment (NCES, 1998, 2003).

A well documented finding about the academic experiences of transfer students is the concept of “transfer shock” a phrase coined after Hill (1965). Transfer shock refers to the decline in transfer students GPA during their first semester or first year at a four-year institution (Cejda, 1994; Diaz, 1992; Davies & Casey, 1999; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Graham & Hughes, 1994; Hill, 1965; Keeley & House, 1993; Zhai & Newcomb, 2000). Glass and Harrington (2002) found that transfer shock can

also increase the likelihood that transfer students will not persist and ultimately drop out of school completely.

Some have argued that transfer shock is often experienced by transfer students due to their lack of academic preparedness, a more challenging curricula and the academically competitive environment of many four-year institutions (Dougherty, 1992). Others examining this phenomenon found that while transfer shock occurs for many, it does not have the same effect on all transfer students (Cejda, 1997; Keeley & House, 1993). Cejda (1997) found transfer shock to be greater for some students based on their major, particularly those in business, engineering and other science related fields. Keeley and House (1993) also examined an entering cohort of transfer students and found that transfer shock had the most significant affect on minority transfer students and transfer students under the age of 25. Fortunately, more recent research has found that the effects of transfer shock subsides over time and that eventually transfer students GPA's increase and by graduation are often comparable to their non-transfer counterparts (Glass & Harrington, 2002).

Laanan (1996, 2001, 2004) expanded the discussion of the transfer shock phenomenon by including an examination of the co-curricular experiences of transfer students at four-year institutions. He argued that focusing only on the academic performance of transfer students fails to acknowledge other factors affecting transfer students once they enter a four-year university (Laanan, 2001). Additionally, he noted, "few [studies] have focused on the social and psychological adjustment process of community college transfer students" (Laanan, 1996, p. 71).



Laanan (2004) suggests the extent to which transfer students become acclimated and involved on campus will determine their level of adjustment to the new environment, as well as their satisfaction with their collegiate experience. While examining the experiences of transfer students from community colleges to four-year institutions, Davies and Casey (1999) observed students encountering what they called “campus culture shock”. Campus culture shock refers to the difficulty one experiences adjusting to a new institution. For transfer students, they suggest this “shock” is magnified due to the lack of support and resources found on four-year campuses for this particular population (Davies & Casey, 1999). Additional research supports this theory as Kodama (2002) found that upon arrival at the four-year institutions, transfer students had fewer “sources of support” on-campus which contributed to feelings of discomfort and marginality.

When examining the level of transfer student engagement on campus, the results from the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) found that transfer students were less engaged than those students who begin at institutions as freshmen (NSSE, 2008). Transfer students also reported having less interaction with faculty, were less likely to work with their classmates outside of class and participated in fewer extracurricular activities than their non-transfer counterparts (NSSE, 2008). After controlling for students pre-college attributes and the institution attended, transfer students were found to have similar results to their non-transfer peers as it relates to academics, however, they were less involved in co-curricular activities and often viewed their campus as “less supportive” (NSSE, 2008, p. 15). Laanan (2007) argues that while transfer students pre-college characteristics can have

a significant impact on their academic and social experiences, it ultimately comes down to what the student actually does upon arrival to campus and how they are able to adjust to their new surroundings that will determine his or her success.

### *Degree Completion of Transfer Students*

After examining students who attended a community college then successfully transferred to a four-year institution, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that “community college transfers have about the same likelihood of earning bachelors degree as do similar students who began at a four year college or university” (p. 592). Many of the earlier studies examining the degree completion of transfer students reviewed both academic records at institutions and national databases to compare transfer students to their native peers and often dispute this notion (Kinnick & Kempner, 1988; Nunley & Breneman, 1988; Sheehan & Reti, 1974). However, Hollahan, Green and Kelly (1983) examined approximately 8,059 students at a large, public university and found no difference in the graduation rates between these two groups.

Several decades later, the debate regarding the degree completion of transfer students continues (Adelman, 1999, 2005; Berkner et al., 2002; Glass & Harrington; Melguizo & Dowd, 2006). In 2002, students from the BPS:96/01 cohort who began at a public two-year institution were examined to find their rate of completion as of 2001. Approximately 25% of students in this cohort who began at a community college stated that baccalaureate attainment was their goal. Of that group, 36% attained a bachelor’s degree by 2001, compared to 51% of students who began their

collegiate career at four-year institutions and completed a bachelor's degree within six years (Berkner et al, 2002).

Other studies have found that transfer students completed their bachelor's degree at a rate of approximately 65-70% which is consistent with the national average of non-transfer students at most universities (Glass & Harrington, 2002; McCormick & Carroll, 1997). However, while some support this observation they also suggest that it takes transfer students longer to complete their degree from start to finish, primarily because of external factors including not being enrolled full-time, work, and other personal issues which lead to transfer students stopping out and then returning to complete their coursework (Glass & Bunn, 1998; Piland, 1995). In 2002, Glass and Harrington compared the academic performance of community college transfer students and native students. Similar to the aforementioned studies, they found no significant difference in the rate of degree completion for transfer students when compared to natives; however, they did find that it often took many of the transfer students an additional semester to graduate. They ultimately concluded that community college transfer students are just as likely to graduate from a four-year institution as their native counterparts (Glass & Harrington, 2002).

#### *Minority Transfer Students*

Some have argued that the increase of students of color attending two-year colleges with the intent to transfer should be a signal to institutions to gain a better understanding of these students and it should demonstrate the need for additional research on this particular population (Johnson, 1987). Although some researchers have begun to conduct new studies on transfer students of color, there remains a

pressing need for additional research to understand the factors that influence their persistence at four-year institutions (Eimers, 2001). Of those studies that have examined transfer students of color, many have produced varying results about their rate of degree completion and overall collegiate experience (Cohen, 1995; Laanan, 1999, 2001, 2003; Piland, 1995; Zamani, 2001). The majority of studies provide general conclusions based on transfer students of color as a whole and often fail to explore one ethnic group exclusively (Flaga, 2006). There is a need to expand and advance the limited body research on transfer students of color in an effort to identify within group differences among this student population.

Cohen (1995) examined the transfer rates of White, Latino, Asian and African American students and found that although many African American and Latino students were attending community colleges, they often failed to transfer to four-year institutions at the same rate as their White and Asian counterparts (Cohen, 1995). Piland's (1995) research produced similar results. In a sample of 300 community college transfer students, one-third of whom were students of color, the data produced different graduation rates based on ethnicity. While White, Latino and Native American transfer students graduated quicker than other transfer students, Whites, Latino and Asians had the highest graduation rates over time. Conversely, African American and Pacific Islanders had the lowest graduation rates of all transfer students examined in this study (Piland, 1995).

Other researchers argue that when examining the co-curricular experiences of minority transfer students similar variations would be found based on race and should therefore be explored in greater detail in future research (Flaga, 2006; Townsend,

1995, Zamani, 2001). In Laanan's (1999) study he found that minority transfer students were more likely than White transfer counterparts to feel "overwhelmed", "intimidated" and "alienated" (p. 20). He argued that these feelings would translate into minority transfer students having a different collegiate experience at a four-year institution, than their White counterparts (Laanan, 1999). Rendon and Nora (1994) found similar results when they explored the experiences of African American, Latino and Native American transfer students and argued that minority transfer students would have a greater chance of successful degree completion at four-year institutions if they were given the support and resources needed to help them achieve their goals (Rendon & Nora, 1994). The findings of these limited studies suggest that campus climate and culture play a significant role, specifically for minority transfer students to become integrated to four-year institutions, thereby increasing their chances to persist (Zamani, 2001).

Wawrzynski and Sedlacek's (2003) research is one of the most recent, comprehensive studies that not only highlights the differences between transfer students and their native peers, but within group differences among the transfer population. They found that not all transfer students, particularly those from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, share the same experiences and expectations when transferring to a new institution. They also suggest that in order to better facilitate transfer students' transitions to a new environment, administrators and those responsible for orienting transfer students to the university must be aware of these experiences and expectations, as well as become more knowledgeable of the various subgroups within this population.

In this study, 2492 incoming transfer students were asked to complete the Transfer Student Survey (Wawrynski, Kish, Balon, & Sedlacek, 1999). Of the participants, 14 percent were African American and the mean age was twenty one. The results of the data analysis revealed significant differences in expectations, behaviors and attitudes of transfer students by race and gender for students who transferred to a large, traditionally White institution. Specifically, they found that transfer students of color arrived on campus with the expectation that they would successfully become a part of the larger university community through various interactions with faculty, staff and peers both inside and outside of the classroom. These findings mirror those of previous scholars who found that students of color highly view the role of involvement in various campus activities and desire to become engaged in the larger campus community (Rendon & Nora, 1994; Tierney, 1992). They also found that this similar theme of sense of community also translated into their academic behaviors in that transfer students of color indicated that they would be more likely to study with other students than their White counterparts (Wawrynski & Sedlacek, 2003).

The findings of this study and previous research that explored minority transfer students reveal that factors such as sense of community, support networks, and the ability to navigate a new collegiate system contribute to the persistence and success of this particular student population (Wawrynski & Sedlacek, 2003). They also suggest that knowing the needs and expectations of minority transfer students prior to their arrival on campus will better enable institutions to develop specific

programs and services to meet those needs which will likely increase persistence at a particular institution.

#### Summary on Community College Transfer Students

This section of the literature review highlights previous research which examined community college transfer students and identified factors which contribute to their persistence and degree completion. While the research on this particular student population is scant when compared to the numerous studies which examine traditional aged, native students, there are a growing number of scholars who have devoted their energies to examining transfer students (Glass & Harrington, 2002; Laanan, 2001, 2003, 2007; Townsend, 2006). Their work calls attention to the increasing number of students who attend multiple institutions and the responsibility for institutions to provide programs and services for this population (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Moreover, it also emphasizes the need for further research to better understand transfer students and to identify the factors that enhance and impede their success.

The purpose of this current study was to identify factors contributing to the degree completion of African American transfer students. Additionally, it seeks to add to current transfer literature and expand the knowledge base by exploring a subgroup within this population that is often not examined in prior literature. Because this is such a unique student population, it is often difficult to apply traditional models relating to student persistence because these students are often not traditional and many of these models were developed based on research conducted on native college students. For this reason, components of several models related to student

success were used to form a framework by which to examine this population. The following section examines these models and highlights areas of each which were relevant to this study and useful when examining African American transfer students.

### Summary of Literature Review

This chapter synthesizes existing literature on both community college transfer students and African American college students attending traditionally White institutions. Because the literature focusing specifically on African American transfer students is limited, it was important to review both bodies of work to frame the context for examining this student population. Additionally, this chapter highlights the need for future research on community college transfer students. As this population continues to grow, it is important to know who these students are, what characteristics they possess and what factors contribute to their overall success. Chapter three describes the methodological approach used for this study. It also describes the data collection and analysis procedures employed. It concludes with an introduction of the participants in this study.



## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The major research question guiding this study was: What are African American transfer students' perceptions of factors contributing to their degree completion at a large, traditionally White institution? This study also sought to answer the following sub-questions:

1. How do the factors identified in the literature as playing a role in the persistence of African American native students at traditionally White institutions also hold true for African American transfer students?
2. How do African American transfer students describe their transfer experience at a traditionally White institution?

This chapter begins with a discussion of the study's design, an introduction of the institutional context and the rationale for selecting this particular site. What follows is a discussion of the sampling techniques employed and an introduction to the study's participants. Lastly, I will discuss the data collection process and analysis procedures employed, as well as address issues concerning the trustworthiness of this study.

### Design of the Study and Epistemological Framework

A qualitative, case study research design was used to identify and understand the factors that 13 African American transfer students perceived as having contributed to their degree completion at a traditionally White institution. Marshall and Rossman (1995) recommended using a qualitative approach when the research is “exploratory or descriptive, assumes the value of context and setting, and searches for a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences of a phenomenon” (p.

39). This study met all three of these criteria. First, it sought to illustrate the complexities of the transfer student experience, specifically for African American students. Second, it provides “thick description” of how African American transfer students describe their transfer experiences at a large, traditionally White institution. Lastly, this study sought to identify the factors that they perceived as contributing to their degree completion. The descriptive nature of this study and its’ emphasis on students’ perceptions called for a qualitative method in order to generate data that would not only answer the research questions, but help draw conclusions based on the framework of this study.

According to Jones, Torres and Arminio (2006), a constructivist epistemology seeks to “understand individual social action through interpretation or translation” (p. 18). A constructivist approach was employed because of this study’s purpose to understand the phenomenon of degree completion for African American transfer students from individuals who experienced it. As a result, this study generated empirical data, built on existing theories of student departure (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993) and minority student success (Padilla, Trevino, Gonzalez & Trevino, 1997; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985). Additionally, this study presents implications regarding African American transfer students attending a traditionally White institution.

Merriam (1998) defined a qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon or social unit” (p. 21). Case study methodology describes and analyzes a “bounded system” or case (Stake, 1995). Within this study, the phenomenon of interest is the degree completion of African

American transfer students; the bounded context is a traditionally White institution in the Mid-Atlantic region and 13 African American transfer students who attended and ultimately graduated from this institution.

Yin (1995) noted that case study technique is appropriate for exploring a topic on which little empirical research exists. Case study methodology was chosen for this study in an effort to examine a specific sub-group of transfer students, a noticeably absent body of research. The findings of this descriptive case study are presented in three segments: participant profiles, site of the study, and a cross-case analysis. Based on the findings, several factors are identified which African American transfer students perceived as contributing to their degree completion and their experiences at a traditionally White institution.

#### Context for the Study

The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) is the flagship institution of the State and is located in Prince George's County, Maryland, a predominantly African American suburb just outside of Washington, DC. Classified as a Carnegie Doctoral/Research University, the University of Maryland College Park currently enrolls approximately 36,000 students and boasts that it is "a university environment that is inclusive as well as diverse" (UMCP, 2007). According to the Office of Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment during the 2007-2008 academic year, when all the participants in this study completed their baccalaureate degree, there were 25,857 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Maryland College Park. Of those students enrolled that year, approximately 13% were African American (IRPA, 2007).

Today there are 26,431 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of Maryland College Park, approximately 10% of which are transfer students (IRPA, 2009). The University of Maryland College Park seeks transfer applicants who have “shown success in their post-secondary academic work, and who offer diverse backgrounds, geographic origins, and personal experiences” (UMCP, 2007). Students who have graduated from high school and have also completed at least 12 semester hours at a regionally accredited college or university are considered transfer students. During the 2005-2006 academic year, the year in which the majority of this study’s participants initially enrolled at UMCP, there were 2,287 newly admitted transfer students enrolled at the institution. Of those transfer students, 325 were African American compared to 1,289 white transfer students (IRPA, 2006).

In the spring of 2005, the Campus Assessment Working Groups’ (CAWG) Subcommittee on Retention conducted several focus groups to examine transfer students experiences upon arriving at the University of Maryland. Their findings indicate that some transfer students expressed difficulty adjusting both socially and academically to the campus. They also found that some transfer students were dissatisfied with the services on campus and that the information they needed was not always easy to access (CAWG Report, 2005). In the summer of 2006, the CAWG Subcommittee conducted a follow-up survey to examine the extent to which these findings were shared across the larger population of transfer students. Their survey results indicated that the transfer student experience was not as negative as the focus groups suggested during the initial study, however, it should be noted that while the committee tested to see if the sample of students responding to the survey were

representative of the population of transfer students, they found that students of color and male students were the least likely to respond to their survey (CAWG, 2007).

Despite the earlier studies conducted by the various CAWG subcommittees on transfer students at the University of Maryland, there are still questions regarding the experiences of transfers, particularly as it relates to their degree completion. While there have been additional data collected via surveys completed by transfer students at orientation, there have not been any additional campus-wide studies examining transfer students since the follow up report in 2007, even though the number of transfer students admitted at this institution has increased by roughly five percent each year since the first study was conducted (IRPA, 2009). Moreover, questions regarding the initial studies' generalizability and applicability to African American transfer students, calls for additional research on the transfer population at the University of Maryland College Park.

#### Rationale for Site Selection

Several considerations guided the selection of the University of Maryland College Park for this study. First, the College Park campus admits a significant number of transfer students from within the State of Maryland, second only to the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) which has an extensive online degree program to which the majority of in-state transfer students seek admission. On average, the University of Maryland College Park admits approximately 2000 transfer students each year (UMCP, 2008). Based on the large number of transfer students admitted to UMCP, I believed it would provide the best opportunity to obtain participants who met the criteria for participation in this study.

Secondly, UMCP has developed an extensive partnership with the four largest community colleges in the State of Maryland. This partnership led to the development of the Maryland Transfer Advantage Program (MTAP) which is a dual admissions program between the University of Maryland College Park and several area community colleges. Through this program, students are “pre-admitted” to UMCP once they enroll at the community college, however they must maintain a minimum GPA during the first two years in order to be eligible for full admission to the university (MTAP, 2008). While the goal of this study was not to examine or evaluate this particular program, I believed its development serves as an indicator of this institutions growing interest in transfer students.

Lastly, my proximity and knowledge of this setting allowed me to gain better understanding of the participants’ experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). As both a graduate student and former employee of the university, I was able to gather information specific to this campus as it related to programs and services provided to transfer students. I was also able to contact individuals who work directly with this population in order to gather documents related to the transfer student admissions process, which were later used as a secondary source of data. While many of these documents helped verify information gathered during the interviews, they were primarily used to understand institutional policies and practices with regards to transfer students.

## Sampling

Purposeful sampling was employed to select the participants in the study. Purposeful sampling consists of sampling for cases that “hold the greatest potential for generating insight about the phenomenon of interest” (Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006, p. 66). This sampling technique allows the researcher to continuously revisit the purpose of the study and the research questions being addressed to ensure “information rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 46). The specific form of purposeful sampling used in this study was criterion sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 1989).

Criterion sampling uses predetermined standards that were of importance to the study to select the participants. Maxwell (1994) argued that in qualitative research it is important to select participants who “can provide you with the information needed to answer your research questions” (p. 17). Based on the research questions guiding this study, I developed a list of criteria for participants which helped me generate a pool of potential participants from which I could garner the most information. The following three criteria were used to select the 13 participants for this study:

1. Participants had to self-identify as an African American student. (Their racial identification was based on their admissions application to the University of Maryland College Park and confirmed via the Registrar’s Office).
2. Participants had to begin their collegiate career at a community college in the state of Maryland.

3. Participants had to be admitted to the University of Maryland College Park as a vertical transfer student.

*Criterion #1*

African American students were selected as the population to be examined because they make up a substantial population of students currently attending community colleges (AACC, 2009); yet tend to transfer to four-year institutions at a lower rate than their White counterparts. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 32 percent of students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions are White, while only 16 percent are African American (BPS:96/01). During the fall of 2006, which was the same year that many of these participants were admitted, the University of Maryland admitted 2335 transfer students. Of these students, 329 were African American.

Based on both national and institutional data, I believed African American transfer students represented a small, yet unique population to study. We know that African American students are more likely to enroll at community colleges (AACC, 2009; Lewis & Middleton, 2003); therefore, understanding what factors they perceive as contributing to their success may help improve the degree completion rate of this population. Additionally, as indicated by the findings of the CAWG report, much of the data collected by the university related to transfer students often did not include data reported by students of color. Similarly, the current transfer rarely explores sub-groups within the transfer student population; therefore I selected African American transfer students as my target population.



### *Criterion #2*

The decision to limit the sample to transfer students from community colleges within the state was three-fold. First, the majority of transfer students currently attending this four-year institution are residents of the state (UMCP, 2007). Secondly, the percentage of community college students transferring from community colleges within the state to public four-year institutions has increased over the past few years and currently stands at nearly 24%. Lastly, the receiving four-year institution selected for this study has worked to develop articulation agreements and various partnerships with two-year institutions within the state to improve the transferability of community college courses and to facilitate a smoother transition between institutions. The University has also joined together with the statewide community college association in an effort to provide greater opportunities for students to complete the baccalaureate degree within the state. I believe these efforts illustrate willingness on the part of the receiving institution to not only improve the transfer process, but to ensure that students have meaningful experiences as well.

### *Criterion #3*

This study chose to examine vertical transfer which refers to students who transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution, as opposed to “horizontal or reverse transfer” which refers to students transferring from another four-year institution or from a four-year institution to a community college. Due to the nature of transfer being explored, it was imperative to select participants who transferred to the University of Maryland from a community college. The list of potential participants provided by the Registrar’s Office did not specify whether the

student transferred from a two-year or four-year institution, therefore all potential participants were asked to identify the type of institution from which they transferred prior to being selected.

In addition to these criteria, convenience sampling was also used in this study. Convenience sampling usually takes less time, money, and effort because it is based on availability and accessibility (Merriam, 1998). Patton argued that “convenience and cost are real considerations” (p.181), but they should be the last factors to be taken into account when searching for participants. However, others believe that in situations where it may be difficult to gain access to a particular group or the group of participants needed is uncommon, then convenience sampling may be the only feasible way to proceed (Weiss, 1994).

Based on student enrollment data from the institution, I knew that the potential participant pool for this study would be small in comparison to other groups on campus, therefore convenience sampling was employed. Additionally, because of the transient nature of college graduates, I also believed it would be easier to contact recent graduates as opposed to those who had graduated several years prior. As such, the participants chosen for this study all attained their baccalaureate degree from the University of Maryland College Park within one academic year of when the study was conducted (2007-2008 academic year). All of the participants still lived in the immediate area with the exception of three who were interviewed during a weekend in which they came home to visit family.

## Data Collection

In order to identify possible participants for this study, I contacted the Registrar's Office and requested a list of African American students who were admitted to the institution as transfer students and graduated between the fall 2007 and fall 2008 semesters. After obtaining this list of 107 graduates, I contacted each student via email to explain the purpose of my study and to provide the criteria for participation (Appendix A). I received responses from 32 individuals who expressed an interest in participating, however only 18 of the 32 met the criteria previously established for the study.

A formal letter was mailed to the 18 possible participants which provided a more detailed description of the study and explained the interview process (Appendix B). A follow up email was then sent to the 18 students one week after the letter was mailed. I received confirmation from 15 individuals who were still interested in participating in the study. I scheduled interviews with all 15 recent graduates, however, one participant was a no-show for the interview and another called and cancelled, therefore a total of 13 individuals participated in this study.

After confirming their participation in this study, I obtained the appropriate consent from each participant based on the requirements detailed by the University of Maryland Human Subjects Review Committee. In addition to completing the consent forms, prior to the start of the first interview, participants were also asked to complete a demographic questionnaire which included information about their enrollment status both at the community college and at UMCP, as well as the number of credits transferred, major and other pertinent information (Appendix C).

The primary data source for this study were semi-structured, individual interviews. The semi-structured interview was chosen as the main data collection tool because of its flexibility and because it allows participants to answer questions from their own perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The semi-structured interview format also allows the researcher to follow-up on certain questions or themes that may emerge and collect other related information that may not have been accessible through a questionnaire. Since the goal of this study was to identify the factors that students' perceived as having contributed to their degree completion, the open-ended nature of this method was found to be most appropriate for exploring individual student perceptions.

The individual interviews were conducted over a six-month period. During the initial phase of data collection, all 13 participants selected for this study participated in a 60-90 minute, semi-structured, individual interview conducted by the researcher. These interviews were scheduled at each student's convenience and took place in a reserved room in the Benjamin Building or the Stamp Student Union to ensure a neutral environment. Within three weeks of the final participants' interview, each participant was contacted via telephone for a follow-up interview to clarify meaning and explore areas for additional questioning and accuracy.

Guided by my research questions and informed by the literature, I created the interview protocol with general open-ended questions designed to understand the factors that each student perceived as contributing to their degree completion. The interview protocol was specifically designed to gain information about the students' experiences after they transferred to the four-year institution. Based on the review of

the literature I was able to identify a number of factors (e.g. family, peers, academic experiences, finances) that helped to inform the design of the study and the interview protocol.

Table 3.1 represents the interview protocol for the initial interview with each participant and the research questions as they corresponded with each interview question.

Table 3.1

*Interview Protocol*

Research Question:	Interview Questions
<i>Introductory Questions</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me a little bit about your experience at the community college and when you decided you wanted to transfer to UMCP?</li> <li>2. What made you choose UMCP?</li> <li>3. What year did you transfer to UMCP?</li> </ol>
<i>What are African American transfer students' perceptions of factors contributing to their degree completion at a large, traditionally White institution?</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What factors do you think contributed to your success at UMCP?</li> <li>2. Throughout your experiences at UMCP, what techniques or strategies did you use to navigate the collegiate system, i.e. learning institutional policies, finding your way around campus, identifying specific people and offices on campus?</li> <li>3. Throughout your college experience at UMCP, what types of programs and services were most beneficial to you as a transfer student?</li> </ol>
<i>How do the factors identified in the literature as playing a role in the persistence of African American native students at traditionally White institutions also hold true for African American transfer students at these same institutions?</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discuss your relationships with individuals within the campus community (i.e. administrators, staff and faculty)</li> <li>2. Describe your interactions with faculty both in and outside of the classroom.</li> <li>3. Describe your interactions with your peers, both in and outside of the classroom.</li> </ol>

4. Describe the members of your peer group. Are they also transfer students?
5. Were you active in any social and/or academic clubs or organizations on campus?
6. Describe your experiences as an African American student on this campus?
7. Have you ever experienced anything that you attributed to your race/ethnicity?
8. Describe your social interactions with other African American students on campus? With White students?

*How do African American transfer students describe their transfer experience at a traditionally White institution?*

1. How would you describe the University of Maryland campus environment as it relates to transfer students?
2. Do you believe there is a stigma associated with attending or transferring from a community college? If so, how is this stigma manifested?
3. If you had to do it all over again would you have chosen to start at the community college?
4. If you were advising a fellow African American student at a two-year college about transferring to UMCP, what would you tell him or her?

*Wrap up Questions*

1. If you had an opportunity to talk with the President of this institution, what would you want him to know about your transfer experience and the time you spent at UMCP?
  2. If you were in a position of authority at UMCP, what if anything would you do to make the university a more friendly and inviting campus for transfer students?
  3. Is there anything else you would like for me to know about your experience at UMCP?
-

An additional interview protocol was designed for the second interview and was based on initial responses to the first interview (Appendix D). The purpose of the second interview was to follow-up on emerging themes identified by the researcher after the initial review of interview transcripts. The initial interviews revealed that only two of the participants were first-generation college students, therefore the interview protocol for the second interview included questions related to the degrees attained by each parent and how their parents' educational status may have contributed to their degree completion.

Another mode of data collection used in this study included an examination of university documents related to the admission of transfer students. Merriam (1988) argued that the use of documents in a "particularly good source for qualitative case studies because they can ground an investigation in the context of the problem being investigated" (p. 126). The document review for this study included examining the admissions website, obtaining transfer student application materials and the information packet provided to incoming transfer students during the Transfer Student Orientation. These documents were used to help the researcher get a better sense of the entire transfer process from start to finish. This included reviewing the step-by-step process for submitting the online application for transfer students, sending transcripts from the community college and attending the mandatory orientation session for transfer students (Appendix E).

In addition to using the secondary documents mentioned above, I also utilized official UMCP public documents as a source for additional data. These documents included the following: the Transfer Student Focus Group Report (2005, 2007), the

Campus Assessment Working Group Report on Stop Outs and Transfer Students (2007) and the Transfer Student Perceptions of their Transition to the University of Maryland 2007 report. I obtained these documents either via the UMCP website or secured them from a staff member the Office of Institutional Research Planning and Assessment. These documents were used to corroborate interview data and to add details that might not have been fully discussed.

### Data Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (1999) stated that, “data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data” (p. 150). In this study, data elicited from student interviews was used to identify and understand what factors students’ perceived as contributing to their degree completion. All individual interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then reviewed by both the researcher and the participants for accuracy.

Nvivo software was used to code and manage the data. Nvivo is a qualitative data analysis software package used for coding, retrieving and reviewing textual data. This software provides a wide range of exploratory tools to identify patterns in coding and relationships between the assigned codes. Nvivo also allows for formatting and editing of documents at any time without affecting the existing coding and has an advance research tool which allows the data collected for this study to be used in future qualitative or mixed methods research.

According to Yin (1994), the goals of analysis in a case study are to discover how the data inform the research questions and to determine the degree to which the



data “fit” with the various concepts outlined in the literature review for the study. In this respect, data analysis occurred in several stages beginning with the examination of both the interview transcripts and the documents previously mentioned, followed by the categorizing of data based on emerging themes, and culminating with a detailed analysis and interpretation of the findings. Data were scrutinized for clarity, accuracy, detail and plausibility in each of these stages. The coding results were used in the final stage to interpret the data regarding participants’ perceptions of factors contributing to their degree completion. The final analysis identified patterns or themes that were consistent with the literature on African American students and transfer students.

#### Trustworthiness and Reliability

Qualitative research is often criticized for a lack of reliability and for limited validity because findings cannot be generalized to a larger population (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994). This type of research often allows significant room for interpretation; therefore, it must have measures to ensure its rigor (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Identifying the role of the researcher and potential researcher biases, triangulation, and peer examination are common strategies used to ensure trustworthiness (Jones et. al, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each of these strategies was used in this study. Reliability was also ensured by providing an audit trail. An audit trail presents a detailed description of how the data were collected and analyzed. Therefore, I included a detailed description of my data collection and analysis procedures in this chapter.

### *Role of the Researcher and Researcher Biases*

To limit the influence of my own biases in the study, it is important that I explain my beliefs, perspectives and values (Creswell, 1998). Additionally, I must also share my reasoning for being engaged in such a study (Arminio & Hultgren, 2002). Much of my professional career has been spent working at community colleges. I subscribe to the mission of these types institutions which is to provide educational and training opportunities for the entire community. Many of the students I worked with while at the community college often expressed an interest in transferring to a four-year institution. While some were successful in doing so, others transferred and attended a four-year college or university only to return later to the community college. I found this practice concerning and wanted to know what was taking place once these students transferred and why some students were successful while others were not, hence my interest in the phenomenon of degree completion for transfer students.

During the time that data was collected for this study, I worked part-time in the Office of Multicultural Affairs at a community college located in the state of Maryland. While none of the participants in this study attended this community college, I was in contact with several students who expressed an interest in transferring to the University of Maryland College Park. Before beginning my position at this particular community college, I worked at University of Maryland College Park as Assistant Director of Outreach in the College of Education. My work on the College Park campus primarily focused on graduate programs and my contact

was often limited to emails and phone calls with graduate students taking courses at various off-campus locations.

Prior to my arrival at the University of Maryland, I spent three years at another community college located in the state of Maryland. In that role I had both direct and indirect contact with potential transfer students. I also served on several committees which focused on student retention, as well as transfer initiatives and partnerships with four-year institutions. As a result of these experiences, I was extremely aware of how my own biases and subjectivity could affect my study and its findings (Creswell, 1994; Yin, 1989). In addition, I was aware of how my history with these institutions might influence how I interpreted the data.

#### *Triangulation*

Triangulation involves the use of multiple methods or sources of data collection to confirm or verify the findings (Stage & Manning, 2003). Triangulation strengthens the overall design of the study because it allows the researcher to overcome the weakness of one particular data gathering method or source through the strength of another (Patton, 1990). For example, documents may be used to verify comments made by participants. In this study, data from interviews and university documents were used to cross-validate and confirm the content, accuracy and interpretation of the data gathered.

#### *Peer Review*

Peer review is another strategy to foster trustworthiness. This process provides another vantage point for scrutinizing a study's findings for bias and error (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer review involves meeting with someone who is not involved in the

study and has no personal knowledge or association with any of the participants. This individual often asks questions about the methodology, conclusions, and biases of the study. Peer review is often employed to ensure that the interpretation of the data is as unbiased as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I was in regular contact with a peer unrelated to the study that reviewed interview transcripts, examined the themes identified by the researcher and suggested alternative ways of interpreting and organizing the data. My peer reviewer also challenged some of the initial conclusions drawn from the data. I was also in constant contact with my dissertation advisor during the data collection process and analysis phases to discuss my experiences and findings.

#### Participant Summary

Thirteen recent college graduates were interviewed for this study. Each participant attended a community college located within the State of Maryland prior to transferring to the University of Maryland College Park. There are 16 community colleges located in the State of Maryland, four of which are considered to be the primary feeder institutions to the University of Maryland College Park. Approximately 75 percent of the transfer students admitted to UMCP from within the State of Maryland come from one of these four schools (USM, 2005). Twelve of the thirteen participants in this study attended one of the four primary feeder schools prior to transferring to UMCP. The remaining participant did not attend one of the primary feeder institutions; however the community college she attended also serves a large student body of approximately 19,000 students and offers associate degree and certificate programs primarily in health and human service fields. The four feeder

community colleges combined enroll over 100,000 students each year, they are each unique in their own way and provide a variety of transfer programs, associate degrees and certificate/ licensure programs to meet the demands of their growing student population.

While this study was initially designed to examine “African American” students, i.e. those born in the United States of African descent, four of the thirteen participants were born on the continent of Africa, yet all thirteen identified themselves as African American. Two of four students born in Africa moved to the United States as young children and attended both primary and secondary school in this country. The other two African participants were raised in their native country and only recently migrated to the U.S. specifically to pursue higher education.

As shown in Table 3.2, 10 of the participants were female and three were male. Twelve of the 13 students were traditional aged students who began their collegiate career immediately following or within two years of graduation from high school. All 12 of those participants were single and had no children. The other participant was 39 years old, married with two children ages 12 and 17. Only two of the participants were first generation college students, defined here as neither parent possessing a college degree (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

All participants were enrolled full time while attending the University of Maryland. The average duration at the community college was two years and the average duration at UMCP was two and a half to three years. Two of the participants graduated in December 2007 and 11 graduated in May 2008. Three of the participants are currently enrolled in graduate school, while six have already applied or are in the

process of applying to graduate or other professional programs. The remaining four participants are currently working or seeking employment in their respective fields.

Table 3.2

*Background Information on Study Participants*

Name	Age	M. Status/ Children	Year of Transfer	Grad Date	Major
Patricia	39	Married/ 2	2006	May 2008	Sociology
April	26	Single/ 0	2006	May 2008	Elec Engineer.
Ursula	22	Single/ 0	2004	May 2008	Finance/Govt
Lacey	24	Single/ 0	2005	Dec 2007	Comm. Health
Tina	24	Single/ 0	2006	May 2008	Pol. Science
Jake	25	Single/ 0	2003	May 2008	Architecture
Randy	25	Single/ 0	2006	May 2008	German
Rachel	23	Single/ 0	2006	May 2008	Fam. Studies
James	23	Single/ 0	2005	Dec 2007	Crim. Justice
Yari	23	Single/ 0	2006	May 2008	Bio. Science
Victoria	23	Single/ 0	2005	May 2008	Psychology
Elizabeth	23	Single/ 0	2005	May 2008	Nutr. Science
Paula	23	Single/ 0	2005	May 2008	Finance

## Participant Profiles

*Patricia- "I knew what I really wanted...I wasn't here to play"*

Patricia acknowledges that her academic journey was far from conventional. As a married mother of two, she wrestled with the idea of pursuing higher education as an adult and what that meant for her and her family. While she knew she wanted to pursue higher education, she wasn't sure when would be the best time or how she would be able to maintain her family life, particularly since they were in the process of relocating to the United States from Africa.

Upon their arrival in the United States, Patricia set a personal goal of attaining a college degree. Although her husband had graduated college in Africa, she knew that in order to find the employment she desired here in the United States, she would need to have a college degree as well. Because the move was a difficult transition for everyone in the family, she decided to begin her journey at the community college by taking one class a semester. After experiencing great academic success and once she felt her children had become adjusted to their new surroundings, she began going to school full-time with the hopes of eventually transferring to UMCP.

After transferring, she recognized a difference between the students at the community college and those at UMCP. Patricia believed much of this stemmed from the fact that her approach to higher education was so different than many of the other students in her classes. She often felt that these students did not always value education or take their studies seriously. According to Patricia, unlike many of the students she was taking classes with at UMCP, she recognized the benefit that higher education would have for herself, her immediate family and for other family members

back home in Africa. Knowing she would be able to help her family back home in Africa served as a major motivation for her to not only pursue a college degree, but to actually complete her studies. She recalls “I knew what I wanted...I wasn’t here to play;” therefore she remained focused on her studies and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in sociology within a year and a half after she transferred from the community college.

*April- “Oh my gosh, this is too much!”*

April began her collegiate career at the community college knowing she would eventually obtain a baccalaureate degree, that was always her primary goal, but she felt that “going to a community college was cheaper.” She applied to and was admitted to two other research intensive universities, but decided against attending them because that would mean “relocating, additional expenses and out-of –state tuition,” so she chose to attend UMCP since she was familiar with the campus and the surrounding area.

April describes her first year at UMCP as a “shock.” She admits that the large classroom sizes, lecture halls, and the overall campus were quite overwhelming, but she found comfort within her academic department, the College of Engineering. Although she felt academically prepared when arriving on campus, she noted the biggest challenge was adjusting to the course load at UMCP, particularly her first semester when she took five classes, four of which were in the engineering department. She candidly reflected on her experience of being the only Black in most of her classes and often the only female. She recalls walking into a classroom and feeling like the other students were looking at her thinking “you’re female and



Black...what are you doing in an engineering class?" She recalled feeling as though many of her classmates questioned her academic ability because she chose to attend a community college first; however, these feelings did not deter her, and she began making efforts to break into academic and social circles both within and outside of her discipline.

After her first year at UMCP, she became active in several extracurricular clubs including the National Society of Black Engineers and a Christian club. She says that she often found it difficult to "break in" to certain social groups because most of the other members had been friends since freshman year and she arrived on campus as a junior. Despite sometimes feeling overwhelmed and thinking "oh my gosh, this is just too much," she admits that if she had to do it all over again, she still would have chosen to attend a community college first, then transferred to UMCP.

*Ursula- "I didn't realize what a big difference it would be"*

Ursula lacked confidence in her academic abilities. Although she took AP courses and scored well on the AP exams, she knew that due to financial reasons attending UMCP was not an option for her, at least not right away. Ursula began taking classes at the local community college during her last semester of high school with the hopes of eventually transferring after one full academic year.

Once Ursula transferred to UMCP, she acknowledges that she truly didn't realize "what a big difference it would be" from the community college. Ursula described feeling "overwhelmed" by the size of the campus and the size of the classes. While she wanted to become involved in several activities and clubs on campus thinking this might ease her transition, she felt that because of her commuter

status she had an even more difficult time meeting and connecting with other students.

Ursula admits wondering if she had begun her collegiate career at UMCP as a freshman if she would have had such a difficult adjustment to campus life. Ironically, one year after she transferred to UMCP, her younger sister arrived on campus as a freshman. She describes her experience as being “completely different” from her sisters and believes that transfer students simply aren’t able to do the same things that students who live on campus such as studying all night at the library or meeting new friends in the residence halls.

Ursula remembers hearing someone tell the audience during transfer student orientation that “you’re entitled to everything that all other students are entitled to” but she really didn’t believe that to be true. She recalls people questioning her about why she would chose to go to a community college in the first place instead of just coming to UMCP. While she knew that she probably would have been admitted directly from high school, she believes that in the end she was able to save herself and her family additional expenses by starting at a community college and believes her experiences there helped build greater confidence so that she would be successful at UMCP.

*Lacey- “I always felt like everyone else was a step ahead of me”*

As an incoming transfer student, Lacey acknowledges that she really didn’t feel “welcomed” on campus. When reflecting on her arrival on campus, Lacey describes the university as “big and very uncomfortable.” She recalled feeling “out of place” because she didn’t know that many people on campus when she transferred.

Lacey recalled having to find information about various programs and services on her own or with very limited assistance or direction. She believes that most students on the campus tend to “do their own thing” and that if you weren’t “connected” with the right people you often had to find out things on your own.

Lacey admits that her “core group of friends” ended up being other students who transferred from the same community college she attended. She describes these other transfer students as her “strongest support” while she was at College Park. She believes that this particular group was her strongest network because they all could easily relate to one another and often provided support and shared pertinent information that they did not readily receive from other students or staff at the university.

Lacey stated that she was indeed interested in joining one particular organization when she arrived on campus, but viewed many of the clubs and groups as “unfriendly.” She describes her interactions with them as “limited” and felt as though many of them didn’t seem interested in meeting new people “particularly not a transfer student” because they were “content” in only associating with people they already knew. This was very disappointing for Lacey, so she began to focus her energies on her studies and trying to graduate.

Despite not making many connections with current students on campus, Lacey attempted to “make the best” of her situation. She does, however, describe a sense of feeling “different” than other students on campus. She believed that freshmen and other students who began their collegiate careers at this institution were “a step ahead” of her and were often more privy to important information. She felt that as a

transfer student she had a much more challenging experience of having to adjust to a new environment and a new system. Despite these challenges, Lacey graduated within two years of transferring and is currently pursuing a masters degree in public health at another large research institution located in Ohio.

*Tina- “trying to figure out all these thing [on a new campus] was very frustrating”*

After encountering what she perceived as a “very racist professor” at a private, four-year institution in the area, Tina decided to leave that particular school after filing a grievance with her department and chose to attend a local community college until she figured out which four-year school she wanted to attend. She describes her initial collegiate experience as “not so good” so she wanted to take her time in choosing her next institution.

Tina spent three semesters at the community college before transferring to UMCP. She acknowledged the differences between two-year and four-year schools, but believes because of the smaller class sizes she experienced at the community college, she was able to become more focused on her academic studies. She credits much of her success to the fact that professors at the community college were “really there to help us.” She admits she wishes she would have begun her collegiate career at the community college first instead of “wasting time” at the private institution she attended.

Tina describes her transfer experience as “difficult and somewhat frustrating,” but admits that the actual application process and submission of transcripts was “easy and fairly simple.” Her biggest issue stemmed from the fact that some of her credits from both the four-year institution she first attended, as well as the community

college did not transfer to UMCP. She became increasingly frustrated as she had to repeat two English courses because the university didn't believe they "fit their curriculum." Despite having to repeat several courses, Tina was eventually admitted into the Mechanical Engineering program.

After being admitted to the Mechanical Engineering program, Tina became a member of the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE). She believes that it was much easier to become affiliated with academic clubs and organizations as a transfer student, than it was to join a social group on campus. Tina credits much of her ease in adjusting to campus with her affiliation with NSBE. She acknowledges the fact that because there aren't that many students of color in the Engineering department, she felt the need to do something to "connect with other Black students on campus." She believes it is important for all transfer students, particularly Black transfer students to search for opportunities to get connected with the school, she commented "this is one of the things that helped me survive."

*Jake- "going to a community college just seemed like an easier transition for me"*

Learning about the campus was really "frustrating" for Jake. He acknowledges that much of what he learned in order to help him "get around campus" came from the internet. Although Jake attended the transfer student orientation on campus, he still did not feel as though it prepared him for what was to come. He admits being somewhat "envious" of his other friends who came to UMCP as freshmen, particularly as they described their overnight orientation experience. He believed that as a transfer student, he needed a similar orientation experience that

would help him become familiar with the campus and the surrounding community, as well as help him feel “more connected” to the institution.

Jake majored in architecture and acknowledges the difficulty he had in being one of very few people of color within his academic department. He often sought ways to connect with other Black students on campus, but admits this was much more difficult than he imagined. While he wanted to become a member of one of the fraternities on campus, he argues that certain groups, particularly Greek-lettered organizations really aren't “set up” for transfer students. He believes that because of his commuter status and the fact that he didn't spend much of his free time on campus really limited his ability to meet other students or participate in extracurricular activities.

One of the biggest surprises for Jake was how “White” the campus was. Being raised in the same county in which the university is located, he found it “shocking and a little disturbing” that although located in such a diverse county the campus was not very diverse at all. He was also very surprised by the high level of crime and admits it was somewhat troubling to hear of all the criminal activity that often took place on, or near, campus. The most unsettling moment for Jake was when a noose was found hanging from a tree on campus during his last semester. Jake spoke very candidly about his disdain for the way administrators on campus handled this “hate crime” and how it changed his perception of the university. At several different times, he commented about what he perceived as a lack of “serious racial dialogues” on campus and believes this was something that this particular institution was incapable of doing. Despite his experiences, Jake still acknowledges that UMCP is a “good

school” with a “strong reputation” and he recognizes the benefits of having a degree from a well respected university.

*Randy- “I already did all that playing around and silly stuff”*

Randy considered himself a “wandering student”. He began his collegiate career at a four-year institution in California, but admits he simply wasn’t ready for college at that time and eventually flunked out of school and relocated to Maryland to live with his mother. After arriving in Maryland and having difficulty finding work, he eventually began working odd jobs around town, but as he attempted to make professional advances, he was often told he could go no further because he did not have a college degree. It was then that he decided to enroll at the local community college.

Randy admits that his return to school was not easy. He continued working full time, in addition to taking several classes each week. He quickly realized that he had to remain focused if he was going to improve his grades and ultimately transfer to UMCP. Upon transferring to the University of Maryland, he recalls feeling somewhat apprehensive that people would judge him based on his previous academic performance. He admits being a little discouraged as he lost credits during the transfer process, but remained focused and determined to succeed.

While he recalls having positive interactions on campus with both faculty and students, particularly those within his department, he admits having had a difficult time adjusting to the new classroom environment and that it took him awhile to become “comfortable” speaking in class or raising his hand to answer a question. Randy remembers often feeling as though he needed to prove himself and “step it up

a notch” after being admitted to UMCP. He knew he needed to be more organized and focused if he was going to “survive” at College Park. Despite his academic successes at the University of Maryland, he admits that he did not have the true “College Park experience”. Randy described feeling like only “half a student” while attending UMCP because he did not participate in any extracurricular activities or live on campus like most traditional students. While he recognizes that he could have made a greater effort to become more involved on campus, he also questioned the role the university plays in making sure all students, particularly transfer students, feel as though they are a part of the larger campus community. Randy graduated in May 2008 and is currently enrolled in graduate school at another university in the surrounding area.

*Rachel- “my brother taught me everything”*

Rachel describes her experience at the community college as “the best decision” she ever made. She recalls watching her older brother make the transition from the two-year college to the four-year institution without losing any credits and assumed if she followed his path she would do the same. Rachel admittedly describes herself as someone who “didn’t have a clue” as to what she wanted to do after high school, so she knew that she would more than likely begin her academic journey at a community college and then transfer after a year or two.

Rachel admits that to her own surprised she “loved” the community college she attended. She describes the small class sizes and attention she received from her instructors as being “just what I needed” and believes that the faculty and staff genuinely wanted to help her succeed. She believes that both her academic and social



experiences at the community college helped prepare her, yet despite this preparation she was still somewhat apprehensive about making the big leap to College Park.

Rachel acknowledges that her transfer experience was much smoother than that of some of her other friends who transferred from the same community college. She attributes much of her success to having a sibling who had taken a similar journey. Rachel remembers calling her brother and asking his advice about what professors to take for certain classes and how she could become more involved on campus. She encourages every transfer student to talk to someone who has also transferred from a different institution prior to their arrival at UMCP. She believes this exchange might help incoming transfer students become more aware of what they can expect the moment they arrive on campus.

While Rachel is proud of her academic accomplishments at UMCP, she often wondered what others may think because she was a transfer student. Although she has graduated and is currently seeking employment in her field, she still questions if her degree is somewhat diminished because of how other may view her time at the community college. Rachel believes there is a stigma attached to students who chose to begin their collegiate careers at a community college because some question the academic abilities of students who attend these types of institutions. However, although she expressed concern about others perceptions of the education she received at the community college, she concedes that if given the choice she would have made the same decision all over again.

*James- "I made it a point to explore"*

James describes his experience at the University of Maryland as "colorful". While he always knew this was the place he ultimately wanted to attend, he recognizes that he did not take the most conventional route. As a middle school student, he was diagnosed with Asbergers syndrome and was placed in special education courses for the remainder of his high school years. Despite having some challenges in terms of how long it took him to complete assignments, he never felt as though his diagnosis would hinder him from pursuing a college degree. During his senior year, he asked his counselor if he could take a course at the local community college, just to "try it out" and see if it would be a good fit. To his own surprise, James got an A in his first college course and immediately decided that after graduation he would begin his collegiate career at the community college.

After a year and a half, he decided it was time for him to start making preparations to transfer. Attending the University of Maryland had always been a dream for him as he recalls passing through campus occasionally or hearing high school friends talk about their experiences at College Park. James admits he never had any formal contact with the university prior to his arrival; however he does recall corresponding via email with several admissions counselors and academic advisors on campus.

Upon his arrival, James immediately became involved on the College Park campus. He attributes his smooth social transition to the fact that he met many people, including some who attended the same community college as he did. He met many of these students through the Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, a Christian club that

meets on campus weekly. He also joined the Black Student Union and a poetry club on campus. He admits that it was through his affiliations with these groups that he was able to meet people on campus and became more outgoing and comfortable being on campus.

James admits his academic transition wasn't as smooth. He experienced a significant drop in his GPA during his first year on campus. In retrospect, he acknowledges that it "probably wasn't a good idea" for him to join so many social groups during his first semester and that his participation in numerous activities often pulled him away from his coursework. Despite the rocky start, James was able to improve his GPA by the time he graduated and credits much of his success to the support services and accommodations he received because of his learning disability, as well as his parents support and encouraging him to focus more on his courses.

During James' last year at College Park, he began toying with the idea of applying to graduate school, but admits he thought this might be a challenge because he never really connected with any of the faculty, yet knew he would need recommendations from them if he were going to apply to graduate school. After graduation, James decided to pursue employment opportunities in his field and is currently gathering information about graduate programs in the area.

*Yari- "transfer students need to talk to other transfer students before they get here"*

Yari believes her transition to College Park was much smoother than many of her other friends that transferred from the same community college, because her brother transferred to the University of Maryland several years prior. She admits that

talking to him and asking him questions about campus really gave her a better sense of what she was “getting into” when she decided to apply to the UMCP.

Yari describes her experience on campus as “mixed”. She recalls the difficult time she had adjusting and becoming connected to faculty, and her academic department. Much of her displeasure came from the fact that she did not feel as though students were truly the priority of the faculty in her department. She recalled several instances where she went to faculty members for assistance and they either referred her to a teaching assistant or simply “rushed through a few problems” and quickly escorted her out the door. She believed that many of the faculty in her program did not seem to recognize the needs of their students and this was the sources of much of her frustration while at UMCP.

Yari admits she really didn’t “get the hang of college” until her senior year. She recalls spending most of her time with other transfer students and not really hanging out with other students she met upon her arrival on campus. She admits some of this was brought on herself, but thinks that many transfer students “miss out on a lot of college experiences” simply because of who they are and how they are become acclimated to the new campus. Yari continuously emphasized the need for incoming transfer students to speak with other transfer students prior to their arrival on campus. She believes that having an opportunity to speak with someone who has “traveled the same road as you” can help ease the transition of coming to a new, much larger campus like College Park.

*Victoria- "it just hits you in the face... Oh, I'm the only one"*

Arriving on the College Park campus was somewhat "overwhelming" for Victoria. She admits that the size of the campus and the number of students made her feel somewhat intimidated during her first year on campus. Victoria recalls arriving on campus for her first day of class and thinking "there aren't too many Black people here" and while she admits that normally it wouldn't bother her, it was something that she noticed right away. Although she admits that most of the people in her social group tend to be Caucasian, she loved the fact that the community college she attended was so diverse and that she had the opportunity to be exposed to many different cultures while she was there and now felt as though she may not have that same opportunity at UMCP.

Victoria admits "I didn't really know what to do when I got here" and describes her initial adjustment as "difficult". She added that she never really participated in any extracurricular activities on campus, however, in hindsight, says she wishes she would have become more involved, but thinks it's extremely challenging for transfer students to become "really connected" on such a large campus.

In her classes she slowly began to make friends as she progressed through her academic schedule, however to her own surprise she found herself drawn to the few students in her class who she noted "looked like me". While her social circle, outside of campus, was predominantly White, much of her time on campus and in classes were spent with other Black or Latino students. She remembers thinking as she walked into class one day "Oh there's a Latina" so she admits that she tended to

“buddy up with someone who is like you, or an outsider kind of”. This continued throughout her years at College Park and was something that she was quite cognizant of as she attempted to meet people and make friends on this new campus.

*Elizabeth- “I don’t even know how I ended up there”*

Elizabeth admits that she isn’t really sure how she ended up attending a community college. She applied and was admitted to two other large, research institutions outside of the state, but remembers her mother constantly reminding her of how expensive out-of-state tuition would be. She then recalls sitting at an awards assembly during her senior year and being presented with a scholarship to attend the local community college. “I don’t even know how I ended up there” she laughed, but she believes her mother must have sent her application materials to the college without her knowledge.

Despite attending the community college Elizabeth admits that it was the best decision for her at that time. She believes attending a community college “forced” her to really figure out what she wanted to do next. While attending the community college, she remembers thinking that there was more for her to do and she needed to really get focused so that she could prepare to transfer to a four-year university. After earlier discussions with her mother about the high costs of out-of-state tuition, she decided to attend UMCP instead of one of the out-of-state schools to which she had been previously admitted.

All of Elizabeth’s credits from the community college transferred to UMCP. She was admitted to UMCP under the Maryland Transfer and Articulation Program (MTAP), which is a comprehensive articulation agreement between UMCP and four

area community colleges. She admits that she probably would have been really upset and thrown off course if all of her credits had not transferred. She recalled hearing horror stories from several of her friends from the community college who lost credits once they transferred. She feared that this might happen to her as well, so she admits she became much more “assertive” when talking to academic advisors and counselors both at the community college and UMCP. Elizabeth ended choosing dual majors once she arrived on campus. While this decision added a few extra courses, she successfully obtained her bachelor’s degree approximately 2 ½ years after transferring and is currently applying to dental school.

*Paula- “I graduated high school with a perfect 4.0, so what....”*

Paula was an honor student in high school. She took AP courses and even enrolled in several college courses while attending high school. She admits that many people just “assumed” that she would want to go directly to a four-year college and “I could have” she added, but she decided to attend the area community college instead simply because of convenience and low costs.

Paula acknowledges that while she did well academically in high school, she really had no idea what she wanted to do upon graduation. She admits that the University of Maryland was always on her short list in terms of schools she considered because they had several of the majors she was interested in, as well as a strong ROTC program; however, she didn’t see the need to “rush down there [to UMCP]” because she was still unsure of her goals.

After attending an all Black high school and a predominantly Black community college, Paula transferred to UMCP after attaining an associate’s degree.

She acknowledges that she had a seamless transfer process because she did a lot of research on her own prior to arriving on campus. Paula spent hours on both the community college and the university's website trying to make sure that certain courses would transfer. She admits that while she knows many other transfer students who lost a significant amount of credits, because of her own persistence and willingness to do a little extra research, she was able to complete all of her core requirements prior to arriving on campus and was admitted into the School of Business at UMCP.

Paula was successful academically; however, she admits her social adjustment was a little more challenging. Because of her hectic schedule (dual-major and ROTC), she admits that she never really engaged in the social scene on campus; however this was not because of a lack of desire, but simply a lack of time. She recalls wanting to participate in several activities, including intramural sports, but believes that certain programs on campus did not seem to be tailored for commuter or transfer students because of the times they are offered. Paula admits that in retrospect, she wishes she would have taken the extra initiative to become more socially engaged and participated in more activities on campus. Now as a first year law student, she says she recognizes the importance of finding a balance between academic and social activities, as well as the need to network and meet other people on campus.

#### Summary of Participant Profiles

While each of these participants shares a commonality of transferring from a community college, they are all very different with different levels of academic preparation and exposure to college. Despite each of their unique journeys, they were



all, with the exception of one, able to successfully attain their baccalaureate degree from UMCP within three years after transferring from a community college. Through semi-structured interviews, participants shared details about their transfer experience at UMCP and identified factors they believed contributed to their degree completion. The following chapter provides a detailed account of data collected from these participants. A discussion and analysis of this data will be provided in chapter five, as well as implications and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER IV:

### FINDINGS

This study sought to understand the factors that contributed to the degree completion of 13 African American transfer students who recently graduated from the University of Maryland College Park. All of the participants were admitted to the university as transfer students from a community college within the state. By conducting semi-structured interviews and reviewing documents related to the transfer admissions process, four primary factors were identified by students as having contributed to their degree completion.

While the research questions guiding this study served as a framework for organizing the findings, there were several themes that emerged during the data collection process that were significant. Although these findings were not explicitly stated in the research questions, they are still relevant to the experiences of the 13 participants; therefore, the findings of this study will be presented in two sections. The first section examines themes which emerged during conversations and individual interviews with the participants. These themes are presented first because they are critical findings which reflect unique and distinct characteristics of the population examined and the way in which they experienced the transfer process. Following the discussion of emergent themes, is a presentation of the findings which directly addressed both the primary research question and two sub-questions introduced in this study. The findings and analyses presented in this chapter represent the participants' perceptions and experiences rather than steps taken by the university to ensure their degree completion.

## Emergent Themes

Throughout the data collection process, many of the participants expressed gratitude for being asked about their experiences on campus. They seemed to view the interviews as an opportunity to reflect on their own educational journey, as well as share information that they believed might be valuable to other transfer students in the future. The following section presents several significant themes that emerged during the individual interviews with the 13 participants. These themes include: the educational status of their parents, the impact of community college attendance, the role of technology and the notion that transfer student status trumps race.

### *Parents Educational Status*

Previous research states that a significant number of students who attend community colleges are often first-generation college students (AACC, 2009; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). While the participants in this study were not asked specific questions about the educational status of their parents during the initial interview, they were asked to indicate on the demographic questionnaire whether or not they were the first person in their family to earn a college degree. After conducting the 13 interviews and reviewing the demographic questionnaires, it became clear that only two of the participants were first generation college students. The remaining 11 participants were contacted via email and asked to describe their parents' educational background in greater detail. From this inquiry, I learned that seven of the remaining eleven students had either one or both parents who not only possessed an undergraduate degree, but graduate degrees as well.

Many of the participants not only had parents who had attained college degrees, but also older siblings. The majority of the participants often cited a parent or sibling as the individual who helped provide guidance to them both before and during the transfer process. They also expressed feeling as though they were better informed about what they could expect because of the fact that their parents and siblings had already gone through the collegiate process and in some cases the transfer process.

It was evident based on the responses of these students that being predisposed to college by either their parents or older siblings played a significant role in their ability to successfully attain their baccalaureate degree. Having parents and older siblings who were familiar with the college process seemed to help facilitate a smoother transition for these students as they often described knowing what questions to ask or being more aware of what to expect once they arrived on campus. The assumption could be made that their parent's level of education and familiarity with the college going process placed them at an advantage over students who did not have the benefit of someone assisting them who had previously attended college. Although parents educational status was not a primary factor considered in this study, the impact of having a parent and sometimes even older siblings who possess college degrees and its influence on degree completion for African American transfer students warrants further exploration.

#### *The Community College versus the Four-Year University*

While the goal of this study was not to compare the experiences of African American transfer students pre- or post-transfer, each participant was given an

opportunity to share their thoughts about their overall collegiate experience. However, the participants made a point of discussing their experiences at the community college and at the four-year university separately. They seemed to view these institutions in drastically different ways which is consistent with much of the literature on community colleges (Laanan, 1996, 2001; Townsend, 1995; Townsend, McNerny & Arnold, 1993). They often compared and contrasted the two institutions throughout much of the interview regardless of the context of the question.

Many of the participants spoke of how much they appreciated their experience at the community college and described it as “good transition” from high school to college. Paula added, “now that I have graduated, I have come to appreciate having the community college as that transition from high school to a four year college.” When asked if they had the chance to do it all over again would they have chosen to attend a community college first, all 13 participants responded emphatically “yes”. They all believed that their time spent at the community college was well spent and gave them the skills necessary to be successful once they transferred. Lacey explained it best as she reflected on her time at the community college:

I feel like I got the most important foundation in terms of meeting new people and making lifelong friendship while I was at the community college...I bonded with people in my class and even the professors because you were able to have that one-on-one interaction with them and that was really important to me...

One of the most prevalent themes noted by the participants was that the community college was a much more “forgiving culture” than the university.

Previous research on transfer students report that students often describe community colleges as forgiving and add that they provide students with a second chance (Access Project, 2004; Laanan, 1996, 2001; Townsend, 1995). Surprisingly, many of the participants in this study talked about the pressure they felt not to “mess up” while attending this institution. It was as though they believed they were given a new opportunity or “second chance” and did not want to disappoint themselves, their families or the individuals back at the community college that helped them throughout the transfer process. When reflecting on his time spent at the community college, Randy shared what having a “second chance” meant to him:

Looking back now...I think it was good that I went to a community college first because it was like really a stepping stone for me to get myself together and get my grades up and then figure out what I really wanted to do...it was also a way for me to balance out my life working and kind of gave me some time to grow and really get my ducks in line before going any further.

Based on these findings it is evident that the community college played a significant role in the preparation and development of these participants. Not only were they grateful for a “second chance”, but they also believed that making the choice to attend this type of an institution allowed them the opportunity to get a better sense of what they wanted to do in the future and what steps they needed to take to accomplish their goals. Additional research on community colleges is needed to gain a better understanding of the influence of these institutions on transfer student success.

### *The Role of Technology*

Many of the transfer students in this study stated that they used technology as a means of gathering information to plot their educational journey. They often gathered course information and specific degree requirements from college websites and used this information advise themselves first and then followed up and met with academic advisors in person to make sure they were on the right track. This was evident as Jake described how he obtained information using the web:

Finding anything for transfer students was pretty frustrating because there is no place to go, so I had to search for most things on the internet. A lot of times different links would just send me in circles and I would get so mad, but it was just a lot of web browsing on the college website because I wasn't on campus all time...eventually I realized that I needed to try and find someone on campus to talk to, but my first tactic was to find the answers I needed on various websites...it would have probably been easier to just know where I could go to get the information that I needed, but there wasn't a place specifically for transfer students, so I searched for most things on my own on the internet.

In addition to using the internet to obtain information about courses, many participants also indicated that they relied on social networking sites such as Facebook, to find out about social activities on campus. When discussing how she became active on campus, Rachel explained:

I never felt fully integrated on campus...like I didn't know of things happening on campus and then I remember one of my friends was like

‘Rachel, you just need to get on Facebook’ and I didn’t even know what Facebook was at the time, but it did help me meet people because people that didn’t even speak to me in class at first started requesting me to be their friend on Facebook and then I started seeing announcements about events on campus, so that’s the only way I really started feeling connected a little more.

Based on these findings, it is apparent that technology plays a key role in how African American transfer students obtain information. Many of the participants indicated that they used the internet as their primary source to gather information prior to, during, and after the transfer process. This suggests that many transfer students often do not receive information through conventional means such as seeing a flyer on a bulletin board or hearing about events from other students. College administrators must therefore consider additional methods for disseminating information about programs and services to both current and prospective transfer students.

#### *Transfer Trumps Race*

One of the most illuminating findings in this study was the identification of a transfer student identity. While all the participants in this study identified themselves as African American, they often suggested that their transfer status was more prevalent at this particular institution than their race. In the early stages of this research, examining the issue of race within the transfer student population was of great importance as much of the current research fails to explore racial subgroups (Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003). Since these students were African Americans attending a traditionally White institution, assumptions were made based on the literature regarding African American students attending these types of institutions. It



was believed that like many African American students attending TWIs, African American transfer students would also have difficulty adjusting to the new environment, making new friends and feeling connected or welcomed at their new institution. While many of these assumptions were substantiated based on the responses from participants, most did not attribute these challenges to race, but instead to their transfer student status. Although many were aware of the impact race had on the way they were perceived by some individuals on campus, the prevailing notion was that the treatment they received was a result of the fact that they were transfer students from a community college and not necessarily because they were African American students.

The participants in this described themselves first as transfer students. They often believed their experiences were different because of their admission status and would often compare themselves to non-transfer students, similar to prior research on African American students often compare them to their White counterparts. Although these students expressed pride in their cultural background and heritage, when asked about their collegiate experiences much of their focus was not on who they were, but rather how they arrived on campus.

#### Summary of Emergent Themes

The themes presented in this section emerged as significant findings throughout the interview process and contributed to a greater understanding of African American transfer students' experiences. The educational status of their parents, the role of the community college and technology and the notion that transfer trumps race are all noteworthy in that they can impact the experiences of African

American transfer students and ultimately influence their degree completion. The following section presents the findings of this study as they relate to both the primary research question and sub-questions previously introduced. In this section, participants identified four factors that they perceived as contributing to their degree completion as well as discussed their transfer experience on a traditionally White campus.

### What Factors Contribute to Degree Completion?

The second set of findings presented in this chapter were informed by the specific research questions of the study. The primary research question asked what factors do African American transfer students perceive as having contributed to their degree completion at a traditionally White institution. The data revealed that African American transfer students believed a number of factors contributed to their degree completion; however, four major themes emerged based on participant responses: 1) strong support networks, 2) confidence in their ability to succeed, 3) intrinsic motivation and 4) educational goals.

#### *Strong Support Networks*

Throughout the interviews each participant described various support networks that they believe contributed to their degree completion. While the participants' stories differed, one common theme that emerged was that they would not have been able to complete their degree without the support of others. All 13 participants emphasized the fact that it would have been "impossible" to complete their academic journey alone. Each of them provided detailed accounts of individuals who provided support to them before, during and after their transfer process. These

networks of support fell into one of the following three categories: peers, family and advisors/staff.

### *Support from Peers*

All 13 participants reported having strong relationships with their peers and indicated that they received a tremendous amount of support from these individuals. Peers were described as the “strongest support” for many of the participants who said that they would not have “made it” if it were not for their peers. When the participants in this study discussed the support they received from their peers, they were very explicit in stating that peers often referred to other transfer students. These peers were students who had either transferred from the same community college at the same time they did or students who transferred before them, but often also attended the same community college they attended.

While each participant acknowledged the importance of meeting new people on campus, when it came to those peers from whom they gleaned support, in almost every instance they referred to other transfer students. This is similar to studies which examine like-type communities and the need, particularly for African American students at TWIs, to identify and associate with individuals who possess similar traits or characteristics (Brown, 2000; Constantine, Robinson, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2002; Gloria, Kurpius, Hamilton, & Wilson, 1999; Sutton & Kimbrough, 2001). For the participants in this study, they seemed to believe that the support, guidance and advice they received from their transfer peers was somehow more plausible or valid because these individuals shared a similar experience. They often depended and relied on the advice of their transfer peers because they believed they were more

knowledgeable about the transfer process and could identify resources specifically for transfer students.

Both April and Patricia discussed the ways in which their transfer peers provided support to them, by either directing them to class or giving them a “heads up” on things happening on campus. They both felt as though other transfer students provided them with greater insight because they “experienced the same thing.” Commenting on support Patricia shared how she received support from her transfer peers:

When I saw other students who I recognized from school [the community college] it was like an immediate bonding...I just always found other transfer students to be more helpful to me. They would kind of tell you what to expect when you get to class and that was really helpful because I didn't know.

Tina expressed a similar sentiment as she also alluded to the “bond” shared between transfer students. She discussed what it meant for her to have other transfer students in her immediate circle of friends:

College Park was a little special for me, but that was just because there are a lot of students who transferred here from the same school that I did, so we were all in the same boat and it was nice to have someone who understands and is willing to help.

Lacey shared a similar story about the importance of her peers:

My friends really encouraged me too and helped keep me motivated, especially during the hard times and I really needed them because it was really difficult for me coming from a smaller environment that I felt was much more

friendly and welcoming, so they were really my support system while I was here and helped me start to gain my own strength and realize what I was here for.

One reason offered by the participants for the closeness of transfer students is that they are often perceived as “different” from native students because they did not arrive on campus immediately after high school. While transfer students are new to campus, unlike native students, they are not foreign to the college going process and have some sense of what it is like to take courses on a college campus. Another factor that may also contribute to the closeness transfer students feel with one another is that the majority of the transfer students at UMCP come from one of four primary feeder institutions; therefore many transfer students, particularly those in this study, recognized other transfer students on campus who attended the same community college. Each participant in this study spoke in great detail about the exchange of information that occurs between transfer students and the sense of a common bond that they all share.

Several participants also talked about the important role that “old friends” played in supporting them. Often these are friends who were not on the same journey, but still encouraged them and cheered them on during this process. They acknowledged the emotional support they received from these individuals despite the fact that most were unfamiliar with the college process. It was evident, by the stories shared by some of the participants that they valued their support just as much as the support they received from other transfer students. Randy explained:

My friends from 'the hood' really don't get it...they don't understand how I ended up here, but just because they don't get it doesn't mean they don't support me. It's good sometimes to have outsiders to talk to...those friends are the ones who help keep me grounded.

The responses of the participants indicated that the social transition from the community college to the four-year institution was challenging. Similar to Padilla's (1997) argument that successful minority students must overcome barriers such as the absence of a substantial minority presence on campus, these participants felt as if they were in the minority because they were transfer students. In an effort to overcome this barrier they purposefully established relationships with and gained support from other transfer students, more so than their non-transfer peers. Ultimately, these participants recognized that the peers in their support network included individuals from various backgrounds who all in some way contributed to their degree completion.

#### *Impact of Familial Support*

Many of the participants in this study also identified some member of their immediate or extended family as part of their support network. In a follow up discussion with the participants, it was later discovered that only two of the participants were first generation college students. The remaining 11 had at least one parent who had attained their baccalaureate degree or in some cases graduate and professional degrees. Many participants not only had a parent who completed college, but they also had older siblings who earned a degree prior to them. In several cases their siblings were also transfer students.

The participants discussed the different ways in which their family members supported them and kept them encouraged. Several spoke of the fact that since their parents and/or siblings had attained their baccalaureate degree this served as motivation for them and often gave them the strength to continue pursuing their education. Ursula explained:

I mean both of my parents went to college, so I always knew I would go too. And then my old brother and sister both went to Maryland, so they all definitely served as a motivation for me to try harder and do well...because they did it I knew I could too.

This sentiment was repeated by other participants, particularly those who had siblings who attended UMCP. Lacey spoke candidly about how her sister “paved the way” for her and helped ease her adjustment to the new environment. She also talked about the comfort she took in knowing that she had a family member she could turn to:

My older sister graduated from Maryland, so I remember coming to visit her on campus and then when I got here she would always call and check on me and tell me where I could go if I needed help.

Other participants shared the ways in which their family members provided guidance on how to navigate the collegiate system. This was often echoed by those students who were not first generation college students. Having a parent or even in some cases an older sibling who attended college seemed to have a significant influence on the way these particular students viewed their educational journey. The participants in this study who were not first generation college students appeared to be more knowledgeable about the college going process. They recognized the

importance of asking for assistance from others and seeking out resources that would help them learn how to navigate their new environment. Many of them also seemed to have received greater insight as to what would be expected of them when they arrived on campus. Yari's comments illustrate this well:

My older brother went here, so I would ask him a lot of questions since he was already here... he let me sit in on a few of his classes and that helped me get a sense of what to expect when I got here, but it also made me feel comfortable because I knew I had someone here on campus to go to...a lot of the other transfer students really don't know that many people and are just out there by themselves.

Similarly, James indicated that his parents provided a lot of direction and support throughout his academic journey.

A large part of my motivation came from my parents. They were on my case all the time making sure that I knew what I was doing and knew how to navigate the system...It would have definitely taken me a longer time to figure things out without them.

All 13 participants in this study identified a member of their family who provided support to them during their educational journey. The level of assistance seemed to vary based on their own educational status, but each participant recognized the importance of not only receiving emotional support from family members, but also guidance from those who had previously attended college and could provide greater insight about expectations and the college going process.



The concept of familial support is substantiated by the work of Bean and Metzner (1985) while examining nontraditional students. Their study identified family as one of the environmental variables which directly influences a students' decision to persist. Based on this assertion, they found that students who were encouraged to stay in school by their family often did so, despite their academic performance (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Additionally, their findings suggest that family support was more significant than support received from external sources such as academic advisors or campus staff (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

#### *The Role of Advisors/Staff*

Some of the participants in this study indicated that they also received significant support from various advisors and staff members on campus. It should be noted that they discussed interactions with advisors and staff from both the community college and the four-year institution. Many students admitted they usually only went to see their advisor during difficult times when they were feeling discouraged and wanted to drop out; however, they took comfort knowing that although they may not see them frequently they would still be accessible. Ursula recalled a specific instance when she considered dropping out, but an advisor stepped in and provided much needed support:

There were times it was very hard and so one time I actually went to talk to someone at student services because I was feeling like “how am I going to ever get out of here”? and she talked to me and kind of calmed me down so I could get back on the right track.

Other students shared similar experiences of reaching out to their advisors on campus, but most admitted that that they did not necessarily seek “advice” from these individuals, rather they needed an encouraging word when they were feeling down. James recalled a time when he went to see his advisor at the community college prior to transferring. He remembered experiencing some anxiety about finding out whether he was admitted to the University and if all of his credits would transfer:

When I went to see him, I knew there was nothing he could really do...it was all in the hands of the admissions people now. But I went to him because he had walked me through all the steps and helped me get my application materials ready, so I guess I just needed him to still be there with me while I waited to find out if I got in or not.

Many participants shared similar stories about how they sought encouragement and assistance from their advisors. In many cases, their needs were not always academic in nature; rather they simply wanted someone to talk to during the times when they were experiencing anxiety. Those participants who sought assistance from advisors at both the community college and UMCP acknowledged the comfort it gave them to simply know that help was available, regardless of whether or not they actually took advantage of the formal services offered.

Much of the previous research on transfer students indicate that they often face numerous challenges when arriving on their new campus (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dowd, 2003; Laanan, 2001, 2003). Several participants emphasized the important role that staff, particularly academic advisors, played especially during their transition to the new institution. They also discussed how they turned to these

individuals not only for assistance throughout the transfer process, but for direction when they felt lost or unsure of their next steps once they arrived on campus.

Similar to the support provided to freshman students who are new to campus, these findings suggests that transfer students may also require additional support not only from their family and peers, but from the institution as well. While transfer students are not strangers to higher education, they are often unfamiliar with the processes and culture of the institution to which they transferred. It is imperative that administrators, staff and faculty are aware of the needs of this population and provide the information needed to ensure a seamless transition, but also assist them while they matriculate at this institution.

#### *Confidence in their Ability to Succeed*

Many participants expressed confidence in their ability to succeed which they believed also contributed to their degree completion. They often shared stories about wanting to give up, yet deep down inside they knew they could be successful at this particular institution. Despite expressing that they often felt like an “outsider on campus,” they still believed they deserved to be there and could do well academically if they kept pushing themselves. Many participants talked about the struggles they encountered once they transferred to the university, yet no one ever seemed to doubt that they were capable of withstanding the pressures of attending a four-year institution.

Despite the difficulties they encountered, all 13 participants were successful in attaining their baccalaureate degree from UMCP. Many spoke about the ways they kept themselves motivated by either reminding themselves why they were on campus

and what they hoped to achieve or simply becoming more focused on their academics. When discussing her own academic abilities, Elizabeth acknowledged that she knew her study habits would have to improve once she transferred, yet she had confidence that she would be able to do the work:

I just knew that once I got here [to UMCP] that I really needed to be more serious and when you are serious about your work you can do anything and so that just kind of gave me fuel to keep going and to try harder and put more effort into my work.

Other students admitted they too had to “step up their game” once they arrived on campus; however, they did not express any fear or uncertainty in their ability to learn the material, nor did they exhibit any feelings of self doubt. The biggest issue for these participants seemed to be adjusting to the transition of being on a new campus. Ursula described her transition and spoke of how she struggled making the adjustment from the community college to a four-year institution and even contemplated dropping out of school:

I just used to push myself and say “look, I’m not gonna drop out, I have a right to be here as much as anybody else”...but it was hard for me, real hard not necessarily the classes, just getting used to being here...but I’m proud that I made it...proud that I ended up being successful here, but I will never forget the rough times...they made me stronger.

Each participant described instances in which they “literally” had to tell themselves that they could and would be successful or that they would “make it” in this challenging environment. These challenges were not limited to their academic

performance, but also how they had to learn to navigate the collegiate system, such as declaring a major or understanding the financial aid process. Ursula described her frustration when she attempted to change majors. She recalled, “things were kind of hard and really confusing, but I kept telling myself ‘you can do this...you’re gonna find your way through here.’” Lacey shared a similar story of the challenges she faced when trying to find her way on campus. She observed:

Many times I had to look for things myself...It was kind of hard, but it made me stronger...adjusting to this new environment was difficult, but I knew I could do it and yes, I had to try and figure out a lot of things on my own, but that builds character.

Whether the participants had to encourage themselves or seek support from others, the fact still remains that these students were confident and determined to be successful in their new environment. It was evident by their responses, that there was a certain level of confidence they possessed which not only helped validate their existence on campus, but also motivated them to continue working hard and pressing forward despite the challenges they faced. While some recognized the stigma that they believed was associated with being a community college transfer student on this particular campus, they did not allow others perceptions to negatively influence their views of themselves or their abilities.

#### *Intrinsic Motivation*

The participants in this study exhibited and expressed a strong sense of motivation to succeed. While they all acknowledged that the support and encouragement from others was critical to their success, they also indicated that they

often had to motivate themselves as well. This motivation often came in the form of reflecting on what they had already accomplished or thinking ahead to what they did not want to occur which was failure. Ursula remembered several instances in which she kept herself motivated. She admitted, “I didn’t do great at Maryland, but I knew I could do this and I had to keep telling myself that...it was hard, but I wasn’t going to give up.” Other participants shared similar feelings and reiterated the importance of keeping yourself motivated. James stated, “sometimes you just have to motivate yourself and just say ‘I’m not gonna drop out and I have to finish no matter what, you know?’”

Several participants talked about old classmates who took the conventional path from high school directly to a four-year institution and were either unsuccessful or returned home after several semesters. While some of them admitted feeling somewhat envious of those friends who moved away from home, others used their examples as motivation. Ursula shared a story about one of her high school classmates who went away to school:

You know as you go through college you hear that some of your old friends who went away to college have since dropped out and like my friend had a full ride to a school out of state and here I was back home at the community college, but I hung in there and she dropped out and came back home, so that was another motivation for me to stick it out and graduate from here.

Other participants shared stories of their past failures and how they used those experiences to motivate themselves once they arrived on campus. Some of these failures were academic while others were personal in nature, but in each instance, the

participants were determined not to have a similar experience while at College Park. Randy shared an example of his own failure and how he used that experience as motivation:

I was really motivated because I had failed in the past and I knew what it felt like for people to say no to me because I didn't have a college degree or slam the door in my face, so when I came here I just knew that I had to be disciplined...In order to be successful here I knew I had to listen to the advice that my professors gave me...I just had to get it done...failure sometimes does that to you...it makes you keep pushing even harder until you get what you want.

Several participants also indicated that they felt the need to either prove to others that they could succeed or prove individuals wrong who had doubted their ability in the past. This sense of proving themselves seemed to be linked to the fact that some have questioned the academic preparedness of individuals who chose to attend community colleges. Despite the reasoning, these students used this as a way to motivate themselves to try even harder. Yari shared a story of how a professor questioned whether or not she had the academic skills necessary to succeed in his class and how she used his doubt in her abilities to do well and build greater confidence:

I remember going to talk to one professor and he just didn't seem to have time for me and I remember thinking to myself "I'm gonna show this professor I can do this with or without him" so I really worked hard to do well in his class

and I did. I feel like that situation taught me to be strong and believe in myself and not only finish what I start, but finish hard.

Tina shared a similar story of how she set out to prove others wrong, particularly those who may have doubted her. She recalled:

I was just so determined to prove people wrong and get my degree. I was the first grandchild in my family to get a degree and that meant a lot to me, to my parents and of course to my grandparents...I always told myself "I'm gonna make something of myself" and so I did well in high school, but it wasn't easy and I figured "I've gone through all this trouble, I'm not going to give up now."

Each participant talked about the importance of believing in oneself. Many gave examples of how others doubted them or their academic abilities, but they believed the confidence they had in themselves contributed to their degree completion. This particular finding suggests that a number of psychological factors may contribute to the degree completion of African American transfer students. Based on the participants' responses, it is evident that what they thought about themselves and their own abilities played a key role in their success. This also speaks to the resilience of these participants and their ability to remain confident and determined despite what others may have thought about them.

#### *Educational Goals*

Another factor which participants believed contributed to their degree completion was having clear educational goals. These goals often included attending a community college, transferring to a four-year institution, attaining a baccalaureate



degree and in most instances pursuing graduate education. Each participant had their own detailed academic plan in mind. This plan was either an actual academic program of study created with the help of an academic advisor or many times just a simple document they developed on their own, for some, before arriving at the community college. In both instances, the participants in this study believed it was critical for transfer students to have clear educational goals even before arriving on campus.

Many of the participants described their time at the community college as “only the beginning.” They all seemed to be very intentional in their decisions and spent a significant amount of time plotting their course of action. April explained, “I always knew my goal was to get a bachelors degree...I couldn’t just stop at an associates, so I had to come up with a plan of attack.” James reflected on his days in high school and explained his awareness of the path he would later take:

I knew from the very beginning, even back in high school that this was where I wanted to be, I just decided to take a non-conventional route getting here, but I knew this is where I would ultimate get my degree from and I did...it may not have been the way others get their degree, but this was the best route for me.

Other participants went into greater detail about their educational aspirations and often gave examples of setting their “ultimate goal” and working backwards to figure out what would be required of them in order to achieve it. Ursula’s comments illustrate this process:

I knew a long time ago that I wanted to go to law school and so sometimes I think my experiences here were just a little preview of what I can expect and so I really spent a lot of time thinking about what it is that I want to do and what it would take for me to not only survive here, but to be successful as well.

Yari shared a similar story of how she set certain academic goals for herself and admitted “I just want great things for myself, so I just knew I had to graduate and keep it moving...I want to go on to medical school, so I made a plan for myself and stuck to it.”

Most participants spoke of the importance of establishing an educational plan prior to transfer. They believed because they were clear on what they wanted to do in terms of major and future career goals that they had a greater chance of succeeding than other transfer students. Rachel recalled, “I came in knowing this is what I want to do and this is how long it’s going to take me to complete my degree...a lot of people who transfer here really don’t know all that ahead of time and I think that’s what slows them down.” Rachel also spoke of the importance of setting timelines after students transfer from the community college. She added, “I knew I was going to transfer and eventually graduate from here but I also knew I needed to set some time limits and stick to them, so I was like ‘yeah I need to be out by this time’ and I really stuck to that and made sure that I was.” Similar to Rachel, Tina also arrived on campus knowing what she hoped to achieve:

I knew what I had to do, what I needed to do and what I wanted to be when I finished school. I knew I was talented and good with numbers, so I knew

mechanical engineering was a good fit for me....it was a challenge, but I was like 'I'm gonna continue this because I know it's been long and it's taken me longer than some other people' but I was determined to get done and get my degree.

The participants in this study realized that their time at the community college was only temporary and entered the institution knowing that they would eventually transfer. This particular group of transfer students not only clearly stated their educational goals, but took steps to find out what they needed to do to accomplish them. Many believed that because they were clear and focused on their educational goals that they were able to succeed.

In a study examining African American students attending community college, Mason (1998) found that having clear educational goals positively influenced persistence. Mason (1998) ultimately concluded that “the clearer students were about what they wanted to be or to achieve, the greater the depth of goal internalization, the more likely they were to persist” (p. 758). These participants truly believed that the energy they put into doing additional research and seeking information from the university gave them with a clearer picture of not only what would be expected of them once they transferred, but how long it would ultimately take for them to attain their degree. Previous studies examining transfer student success have also found that taking initiative and relying on oneself for information was critical for transfer students once they arrived at the four-year institution (Davies & Casey, 1998; Flaga, 2006; Laanan, 2007; Townsend, 1995). The findings from this study support these claims and suggest that African American transfer students were able to successfully

attain their degree from this institution in part because of they set educational goals and sought information to help them achieve these goals.

### Summary of Factors

As indicated by the primary research question, this study sought to identify and understand factors that African American transfer students perceived as contributing to their degree completion at UMCP. The most prominently mentioned factors included strong support networks, confidence in their ability to succeed, intrinsic motivation and educational goals. These findings suggest that there are both psychological and environmental factors that play a role in the success of African American transfer students; this will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five. The next section addresses the first sub-question of this study and explored what is already known about African American students attending TWI's to determine how the factors identified in the literature has playing a role in the persistence of these students also hold true for African American transfer students.

#### What Factors Influence Persistence of African American Students?

The first sub-question of this study asked how do the factors identified in the literature as playing a role in the persistence of African American native students at TWI's also hold true for African American transfer students. Based on a review of prior literature we know that African American students attending TWI's experience greater challenges than their White counterparts, this may include difficulty adjusting to their new environment and feelings of loneliness and isolation, negative perceptions about traditionally White institution and lower academic performance. Using this literature as a frame of reference, the participants in this study were asked

questions related to their academic, social and racial experiences on a traditionally White campus. The findings from this data are organized into three categories: academic experiences, social experiences and the campus environment.

### *Academic Experiences*

Similar to the research conducted on African American students attending predominantly White institutions, the African American transfer students in this study expressed difficulty adjusting to their new academic environment. It is important to note that when these African American transfer students were asked about their academic experiences and they did not describe their academic experiences based on their performance in individual courses, but rather how they performed overall and ultimately their success was defined by the fact that they graduated. These participants seemed to recognize that because they graduated and some of their transfer peers, particularly those who transferred before them had not indicated they were in fact a unique group of transfer students. When examining the academic experiences of African American transfer students in this study, the following themes emerged: academic preparation, interactions with faculty and interactions with peers within the classroom.

### *Academic Preparedness*

While some of the participants in this study lacked confidence in their academic abilities after graduating from high school, many felt that they had sharpened their skills while attending the community college. Most of the participants believed that they were academically prepared when they arrived at the University of Maryland and argued that the community college either “brought them up to speed”

on the things they did not know after completing high school or taught them how to improve their current study skills so that they would be prepared to transfer.

All 13 participants disputed the notion that all students who choose to attend a community college are not academically capable of performing well at a four-year institution. In fact, many of them believed that attending a community college gave them better insight as to what to expect while in college and saw themselves as having an advantage over other students, particularly freshmen arriving on campus directly from high school. Ursula, who took courses in the honors program at the community college, believed that her courses at the community college were “more challenging” and helped prepare her for 300 and 400 level courses at the university:

I don't feel like they [the community college] shorthanded me or anything, especially in my honors classes, they were smaller and so they kind of pushed us even more...so I don't feel like it was any ill preparation... in hindsight, I think it was good that I went there instead of coming here first.

Patricia, like other participants, also believed that she was academically prepared once she transferred to the University of Maryland, but did acknowledge that she was faced with other challenges within the classroom:

I think I was academically prepared because I just really knew what I wanted and I was not coming here to play, but the biggest challenge was trying to figure out what was expected of you as a student, not so much whether or not you knew the material because most of the time I did, but I didn't always know how the professor wanted me to present it.

Several participants expressed difficulty adjusting to the course requirements at the four-year institution versus the community college. Many of them acknowledged that when they arrived on campus their course load increased dramatically and that they did not have difficulty mastering the concepts presented in their courses, but simply the amount of work required for each class. April, an engineering major, described her course load during her first semester after transferring:

I think it was a challenge not because I wasn't prepared enough, but because of the course load...I entered my junior year here as an electrical engineering major and I had five courses, four of them were engineering and I just had never taken that many classes before...ever! The real struggle was trying to balance all of this...I felt I was sufficiently prepared, but there was just so much more work than before.

All the participants agreed that the community college did a good job of preparing them for their upper level courses at the University of Maryland. Many believed the community college not only prepared them academically, but also provided the information necessary to facilitate a seamless transfer to the university. While only five of the participants actually completed the full coursework to attain an associate degree, many felt that the time spent at the community college was invaluable and contributed to their success once they transferred.

#### *Faculty-Student Interactions*

Participants in this study indicated that they had both positive and negative interactions with faculty while attending UMCP. What mattered most was what

faculty said to them and how they conveyed confidence, or lack of confidence, in their abilities. In some instances, students' perceptions were that some of the negative interactions they experienced with faculty members had to do with the fact that they were transfer students. Although many of them acknowledged the fact that their professors may not have initially known they were transfer students, some believed that once they found out they tended to treat them "different" or question them about their caliber of their work. They often described feeling this way after meeting with the faculty member one on one after class or during office hours and disclosing that they previously attended a community college prior to arriving at UMCP.

Many participants argued that faculty simply do not recognize or understand the "plight of transfer students." They often felt as though faculty were unaware of some of the challenges transfer students face or that many of them worked full-time and were only on campus several days a week. Lacey believed it was important for faculty to be aware of such things and recognize the needs of all students. She added:

I just feel like it's important for professors to understand that there are different groups represented there [in class]...they need to be aware of each student and their needs and not just pay attention only to grades, but know that there may be other issues may be going on with students outside of just grades, but that can only happen if they take the time to try and get to know their students.

Several participants believed some professors were not cognizant of the fact that some students, particularly transfer students, do not live on campus, therefore they did not make themselves available for students with other obligations and conflicting



schedules. James shared an example of a time he needed to meet with a professor about a problem he was having in class, but was unable to schedule a time to meet:

I always felt like the professors here made their schedules under the assumption that most, if not all, students are living on campus. A lot of times, office hours and such aren't really scheduled at the best time, especially for me since I lived off campus and worked, so I just think it would be nice if they consider students like us and possibly set up alternative office hours for those of us who work or have other family obligations...I mean I felt like my questions were just as important as anyone else's...I needed help too, but he would not arrange a time outside of his office hours to meet with me and that was really disappointing.

Other participants compared the faculty members at the community college to faculty at the university. Many seemed to notice a difference in the way faculty interacted with students at the university and attributed most of this to the size of the classes, as well as other obligations at the university specifically research projects. Patricia believed the "teacher-student ratio" at the university made it more difficult to establish close relationships. She explained:

The classes here were really big unlike the community college...back there it was like the teacher-student relationship was really close...the teacher could get to know every person in the class, but it wasn't like that here...every class seemed just too big to really get to know your professor or for them to know their students.

Not all interactions with faculty at the university were negative; in fact, the positive behaviors of faculty were equally revealing. Participants talked about those professors who applauded them when they performed well or encouraged them to be more vocal during class discussions. Randy added, “Some of the professors here are cool and they really encouraged me. When I would come up with an idea, they would say ‘great, run with it, write about that’...and sometimes you really need to hear stuff like that.” Participants also spoke of those faculty members who encouraged them to become active in events outside the classroom such as research projects and academic clubs and organizations. Tina shared an example of how one faculty member presented her with an unexpected opportunity:

For the most part they [faculty] are pretty good. I mean a lot of them do have research projects that they are busy with, but I found that some of them will allow their students to come help with them and so I did have that opportunity and wasn’t expecting it because all of the other students working with him on projects had been with the team since freshman year and I was new and didn’t know if I would be accepted, but he always made me feel like I was part of the team and that it didn’t matter how long I had been here.

What seemed to matter most to these participants were that faculty accepted them and treated them like the other students in class. They did not seek preferential treatment, but simply to be viewed equally among their peers. Ursula shared an example of one of her positive interactions with faculty and the impact it had on her performance:

Every once in awhile you find a good professor who says encouraging things and that definitely helps...and sometimes even his talks were encouraging and

kind of motivating and it made me become more interested in the coursework and I started doing better in that class.

Several participants offered other examples of what professors did to make them feel connected in the classroom. Something as simple as calling a student by name often helped ease them into class discussions. Acknowledging students and engaging them in classroom discussions and activities seemed to have a significant impact on the way students perceived the faculty member and how much they enjoyed a particular class. Patricia recalled:

There was one particular professor who really went out of his way to make everyone feel welcomed...it really made me feel good because there were several of us [transfer students] in this particular class and I think he was trying to make even us feel at home in his class...he really wanted us to become more involved.

Although the participants recognized that they took a different route than most students, they wanted to be treated with the same level of respect and be awarded the same opportunities as native students. Many participants simply wanted to feel as though they were involved and somehow connected to the class. What seemed to be most important to them was that they were acknowledged by faculty members, yet not viewed in a different light because of their transfer status.

#### *Peer Interactions Within The Classroom*

Participants in this study acknowledged difficulty connecting with their peers inside the classroom. Some appeared to be surprised by this and thought it may be easier to make friends in class since none of them lived in the residence halls or spent

a significant amount of time on campus. What they later discovered was that it was just as difficult to make friends in class as it was outside of class. Elizabeth explained:

I know it sounds a little naïve, but I just really didn't know a lot when I came here. I didn't really have anyone explain things to me, and it wasn't always that easy to make friends with people, not even in class...and when they found out I went to a community college first it was like they didn't want me to be in their study groups...I guess they didn't think I was smart, so I kind of just kept to myself.

April expressed a similar sentiment when she described her interactions with peers in class. Many participants, like April, expressed feeling like an “outsider” even in class because many of the other students in the class had taken introductory courses together and were familiar with one another, whereas many of the transfer students took their 100 and 200 level courses at the community college. April recalled:

I think this was one of the hardest adjustments because, especially in the classroom setting, just as in the student clubs, there are these groups that were formed since they were in freshmen year and they know ‘okay, next semester we are taking this teacher and all five of us in our little group are gonna be in class together again’ and then I come in and I didn't know anyone...I really had to become kind of aggressive and just be like ‘oh, are you guys meeting to study?’ or ‘when are you guys meeting to go over the homework?’...it was hard, but I knew if I didn't do that then I would end up sitting up hours on end trying to solve problems by myself.

Yari also described feeling “out of place” in the classroom because she did not know the other students. She noted:

It’s not easy coming into a class when you are a transfer student...it's like most of these people have been taking classes together since their freshman year, so you don’t know them and it’s like you eventually become even more secluded, even in class when you are supposed to be talking and participating.

Some of the participants seemed to be disappointed with the interactions they had with their peers in the classroom. Many believed that their transfer status contributed to the disconnect they felt with other students. These findings have significant implications for what takes place in the classroom in that it presents a group of students who want to be engaged, active participants, yet feel isolated because of how they believe others perceive them and their academic ability.

#### *Social Experiences*

Similar to their experiences inside the classroom, many participants in this study also expressed difficulty meeting new people and connecting with their peers outside of the classroom as well. Most of them attributed this to the fact that they were the “new kid on the block” and often thought that many of the current students “just knew” that they were new to campus. When participants in this study were asked about their social experiences on campus, their responses often fell into three categories: interactions with peers outside the classroom, difficulty breaking into social groups, and the need to search for individuals who were “like them.”

### *Peer Interactions Outside the Classroom*

When participants were asked to describe their interactions with peers outside the classroom, many students talked about the difficulty they encountered when trying to meet new people once they arrived on campus. Several participants stated that they did not feel this campus was very “friendly” or “welcoming” therefore they found it challenging to meet new people. Lacey explained:

The people here really aren't friendly unless you are like connected to like a group or an organization or if you know someone beforehand so it's not like you can always get a lot of assistance from other students and they really don't go out of their way to meet you.

Rachel expressed similar feelings and shared an example of how she felt when she attempted to meet new people:

When I arrived here it wasn't really the classes that surprised me. I think it was the students and the atmosphere. Like there was such a disconnect to me, like with the students, it's like they don't even see you...they don't look at you or like acknowledge you, it's like people here have tunnel vision and I found that to be really weird.

Patricia also recalled having difficulty trying to meet new people when she arrived on campus. She explained:

It was just really big and uncomfortable when I first got here...everyone was just to themselves in the sense that people don't seem to speak to people they don't already know...you just end up feeling kind of strange, like how will you be looked at? Will you be welcomed? Are they watching me?

All of the participants in this study believed they did not share the same social experiences as other students and felt much of this was due to their transfer student status. As transfer students, most of the participants acknowledged that their time spent on campus was often limited and therefore made it even more difficult to become involved social groups or activities. Randy explained:

I can't say that I had the "College Park experience" because I really didn't spend too much time here [on campus]... I came usually just came here straight from work and I was just trying to focus and handle my business...I really only felt like half a student here and the university didn't do much to help change that.

Other participants talked about their desire to connect with current students and become involved on campus, but noted they were often unable to do so because of scheduling conflicts. Patricia explained, "yeah, I really wanted to join the choir, but I found out that they met in the evening which is not good for me because I have to be home for my kids." Jake also expressed an interest in becoming active on campus, but similar to Patricia, initially he was unable to do so. He elaborated:

I really wanted to be involved in several clubs and even wanted to join a fraternity, but I was working a lot so I couldn't be involved, plus they met on days when I wasn't on campus...it became easier towards the end of my time here because I wasn't working as much, but it was still difficult trying to get in and get to know all these new people who had never seen me hanging around campus or anything.

Towards the end of his collegiate career, Jake recognized the importance of becoming involved on campus. He indicated that he had to make a concerted effort to be on campus, even on days when he didn't have class, just so he could become more involved:

The longer I stayed on campus the more I realized how important it was to get involved, so eventually I started going to various things on campus, but it was really difficult because of time...I just wasn't on campus everything like most other students, so I had to make the extra effort to be connected and to become involved.

#### *Difficulty Breaking Into Social Groups*

Similar to their interactions with peers in the classroom, the participants in this study attributed much of their difficulty breaking into social groups to current students developing friendships and social groups during their first and second years of college. They believed it was much harder for them to "break in" to certain social groups because they were not around during the time these initial bonds were formed. Almost all of the participants talked about the challenges they faced when they did make attempts to join social clubs or organizations on campus. Lacey began by sharing her experience during the clubs recruitment fair:

I thought the whole environment was very unfriendly and even though they have organizations and groups, they only really speak when they are recruiting new members or having an event and they want people to come to, but just on a regular day they don't ever speak to you.



While not all the participants attended the clubs fair, most shared a similar opinion when it came to some of the social clubs and organizations on campus. Yari described her perceptions of social groups on campus and what that meant for transfer students who wanted to become involved:

It's like most of these people in these clubs have been members since they were freshmen and once you're a transfer student who is coming in like as a sophomore or junior it's like you have reached a certain level and so it's even harder for you to enter their circle.

Rachel also spoke about student groups on campus and added, "most of the groups and cliques were already formed so it was kind of hard just meet people and introduce yourself to this new network of people."

Several of the participants described the efforts they made to become involved in certain social clubs on campus; however, they still felt like "outsiders" when they arrived because they did not know any of the other members in the group. Victoria described her experience when she arrived at an interest meeting for an organization on campus:

I tried to become more active, but even when I emailed [the contact person for the group] they would tell me when and where to come, but when I got there I still felt like an outsider because I didn't know anyone and no one really went out of their way to try and meet me or introduce themselves.

Similarly Elizabeth found:

It was hard, even in the club, it was just different because some of these people had been in this club since their freshmen year and it's like you're

coming in as a junior and their like ‘who is this?’ ...and so they have their language, and their friends, and their little groups, and you’re the new person in the club, so it was really difficult adjusting to that.

Many of the participants in this study expressed a desire to become actively involved in campus activities. These findings challenge the notion that transfer students have no desire to become socially integrated on campus (Townsend, 1995). It also suggests that there is a need to educate not only faculty, but other students about the transfer student population. Knowing more about the needs of transfer students and their desire to become more involved on campus may lead to a greater effort to create new opportunities for social events and activities for this specific population.

#### *Searching For Individuals Who Were “Like Them”*

Not surprisingly, because the participants in this study indicated feeling like an “outsider” on campus, they often spoke about their need to connect with someone “like them.” This was particularly important during their first year on campus as they attempted to become acclimated to their new environment. In many instances when the participants talked about individuals, they were not only talking about other African American students they could connect with, but also in most cases, they were referring to other transfer students.

Many of the participants talked about the connection they had with other transfer students and how they would often seek them out or sometimes simply recognize them from the community college and approach them when they saw them

on campus. Ursula explained what it meant for her to see and connect with individuals who were like her:

You know, it's like seeing them [other transfer students] around campus and hearing then what they were going through it helped me realize that I wasn't slow and they were going through the exact same thing...it was just like we had this special bond.

Rachel also talked about the "bond" that transfer students have and how they often ended up befriending one another:

Most of us [transfer students] just built friendship based on the fact that none of us really knew anybody, so we just hung out together and if then if one person would hear about something they would share it with the rest of us and that's the way we found out about stuff and started going to some of the events.

Other participants discussed the ways in which they searched for individuals "like them," but in these instances they were talking explicitly about race; however, many of their comments were related specifically to finding individuals "like them" in the classroom. Those participants who spoke on this topic, talked very candidly about what it was like for them being in large classes and being the "only one" or "one of a few" students of color in the class. Victoria remembered how she felt during one of her math classes her first semester:

It's funny because I would sit in my class and be like 'oh I see another Black girl' and so you kind of buddy up with someone who is like you, or an

outsider kind of...that makes it a little bit better when you can be with someone like you and not feel all alone, especially in large classes.

Randy also discussed his experience in the classroom and how he often sought out other students of color:

There a lot of things that happen in the classroom, especially when you are one of a few Black people and like during some discussions I would hold back and not say anything, but eventually I got more comfortable and then after I would make my comment then the other Blacks in the class would chime in and support me, but I don't think any of us really felt 100% comfortable about speaking out in class, especially if it was something we disagreed with...but that's why it helped to have at least one or two people in the class who look like you...that makes you feel like maybe someone's got your back.

Many of the participants explained that when you are new to a campus environment “you just start searching for someone like you.” To some this meant finding other students who were also new, specifically other transfer students. For others, they were searching for individuals who looked like them, particularly when they found themselves to be the only Black person in the classroom or simply one of a few. Nevertheless, they all spoke of how important it was for them to connect with someone “like them” and the need to have those individuals to talk to, gather information and support from.

#### *Campus Environment*

Participants in this study were asked a variety of questions related to the campus environment. Three themes emerged from their responses: size of the

institution, racial experiences and the racial climate on campus and a sense of belonging at the institution. Participants expressed concerns about all three of these areas which gave them a unique perspective on whether or not they thought the campus was friendly or welcoming, specifically as it related to transfer students.

### *Size of the Institution*

When discussing the campus environment, many participants acknowledged being initially overwhelmed by the size of the College Park campus. While most had visited the campus prior to attending, they were still shocked by the size of the campus, as well as the number of students attending the university. Many of them talked about their fear of attending a school that was significantly larger than the community college they previously attended; however, all of the participants said that they eventually adjusted to the size of this institution.

April shared her experience in her first science lab on campus:

I think my first year I was just in complete shock...it's just a much bigger school with bigger classes. My very first class that I took was a lab and although the lab was divided into sections of about 15 [students] the lecture was huge...it was like 75 of us in there and all I kept thinking was 'oh my gosh, this is too much'...it was a big difference.

Many participants compared the size of the institution to that of the community college and often referred to the larger campus community as being "intimidating." Others thought the community college was more like high school in that it was "small and intimate" and provided greater opportunities to meet new people and to feel as though they were a part of the campus community. While most

of the participants indicated that they preferred the smaller educational environment, they believed they had greater opportunities and more resources at a larger institution.

### *Racial Climate*

Participants were also asked about their racial experiences and the racial climate on this traditionally White campus. They discussed racial incidents on campus and how they coped with these incidents and the pressure they felt to prove themselves based on race. Not all participants reported experiencing racial incidents themselves, nor did they all have perceptions that they had ever been treated differently based on race; however, they all acknowledged the racial “tension” and “divide” that they believed was prevalent on this campus.

Some of the racial experiences that participants shared were based on their time spent at the community college as they often emphasized the racial composition of those campuses in contrast to what they found at the University of Maryland. Victoria described her thoughts about the lack of diversity on the College Park campus:

It was really different when I came here because the community college was pretty much diverse and when I came to Maryland it was like all these White people everywhere and I didn't see too many Black faces and I mean I did go to a predominantly White high school so it really didn't bother me too much, but I could just notice it right away from the moment I came to campus.

While Victoria immediately “noticed” what she perceived to be a low number of minorities on campus, others expressed their “shock” when they realized how few students of color actually attend this institution. Jake explained:

I wasn't expecting it to be as majority White as it is because I was born in this county and its very diverse and so it's just weird to be on a campus located here, but it's not diverse at all...compared to the community college it was definitely a lot less diverse...you have a little bit of every culture, but on a much smaller scale here than at the community college.

While there were different perspectives on race, the majority of participants perceived that on occasion they were judged differently based on race; however, many attributed it to being "just a part of life" and did not seem to be as phased by it. Others indicated that they simply "accepted it" and could not allow it to "consume" them. Ursula described what she termed as the "minority experience at UMCP":

The minority experience at UMCP is just unique...it is really what you make of it...you have to put forth a lot of effort to be accepted sometimes, but you just gotta push yourself to really search for and embrace the little diversity is here.

All 13 participants believed that racism was prevalent on this campus; however, not all of them described experiencing it directly, yet many expressed deep concerns about racial incidents that took place on campus. During the semester prior to these interviews being conducted, a noose was found hanging from a tree outside of the Nyumburu Cultural Center on campus. According to the mission statement, Nyumburu is the "Center for Black social, cultural and intellectual interaction" on the College Park campus (UMCP, 2009). Each year, the Center houses various activities which celebrate the African Diaspora culture and heritage. When asked about their racial experiences on campus, many students spoke specifically about the incident at

Nyumburu and how they responded. Most stated that this particular incident was the most prevalent act of racism they experienced while on campus and although it was not directed towards them individually, they believed this one single act caused greater racial tension and a divide on campus between different groups of students.

Jake explained:

After the noose incident it was like my White friends were waiting to see my reaction. One of them was like ‘I don’t see the big deal about it’ and the other didn’t know how to respond to me because if didn’t know if I was angry at him.

Randy also spoke very candidly about how he perceived things on campus after this same incident:

The whole noose incident kind of uncovered some hidden or underlying issues of prejudice or racism on campus that I didn’t know existed...for a few days afterwards there was some pretty heavy tension on campus...you could feel it when you walked past...people looked at different races, you could just feel it...that was probably the worse experience...there was just so much tension between Blacks and Whites and you could just feel it.

When asked about other racial experiences on campus, some participants used this opportunity to discuss how they felt they were perceived on campus by their peers and faculty and their need to “prove themselves.” While some participants felt the need to prove that they deserved to be on campus simply because of their transfer student status, others felt this similar need to prove themselves based on race. This notion of proving themselves based on race may be a result of the fact that African



American students only make up 13% of the entire undergraduate student population at UMCP, when compared to community colleges within the state of Maryland in which 29% of current student population is African American (AACC, 2009); therefore the small number of African Americans on campus seemed to influence the way in which some participants believed others viewed them. This was brought up, in many cases, when participants described what it was like to be the only African American or one of a few people of color in a classroom. Ursula was one of those individuals who believed that she had additional pressure in the classroom because of her race. She explained:

I always felt like I had to do well because I knew I was ‘representing’ [for my race] and since I was one of only a few [black students in the class] I just felt like I needed to do well...there were many times when it was hard being one of one two or three black kids in a class of 40 or more people...then you start wondering if you are just a statistic or maybe if they [the other students] just believe all the stereotypes that are out there about us [African Americans] and so you know that was a really tough experience for me.

Others also talked about what it was like to be “the only one.” Randy described the discomfort he felt in one particular class because he felt he was being examined by others solely based on his race:

I really hated speaking up in class, especially if we were talking about race or something like that. It was like “oh God, I’m gonna get into another one of those conversations” and I just felt like it was useless because they just don’t

get it and then of course I turn into the spokesperson for all things that are Black and I hated even going there.

Victoria shared a similar experience and talked about her frustrations as she was often made to feel as though she was the “spokesperson” for all African Americans. She explained:

And then sometimes in my sociology class, our professor would bring up the topic of race and then look at me and say ‘well how do you feel?’ and I would reply ‘I’m not the representative for all Black people’...it's just so crazy because if it was a White person taking an African American studies class I don’t think the professor would go up to him and say ‘oh how was your experience and how do all White people feel about this or that’ you know?

It was evident based on the responses from participants that their racial experiences and the racial climate on campus influenced the way they perceived the entire campus environment. Some viewed the campus environment in a negative way based on their experience as a transfer student, while others believed their race played a major role in how they viewed the institution and how others at the institution viewed them. In this final section, several participants discussed how their level of discomfort within the campus environment caused them to question whether or not they belonged at this particular institution.

### *Sense of Belonging*

Similar to literature on students of color who attend predominantly White institutions, many participants in this study expressed feeling as though they were unsure of whether they belonged on this campus. It is important to note that all

participants believed they deserved to be there and that they had the academic ability to perform well at this institution; however, several expressed feeling some uncertainty about whether this particular institution was the best fit for them and stated that they never truly had a sense that they “belonged” on this campus. Lacey discussed how she felt when she arrived on campus as a transfer student:

I always felt like the other students were just a step ahead of me...like they always knew information that I didn't and so I really started to wonder do I really belong here like 'why am I even here?'

Yari also described feeling “out of place” on campus, especially in the classroom:

Oh my goodness, I just remember feeling so out of place while I was here, especially this one time because we were in lab and I was the only black female in the class and it was like no one wanted to be my lab partner and then eventually the professor assigned a partner to me, but I could tell he really didn't want to work with me, but I just continued doing what I needed to do well in the class, but that always kind of stayed with me in the back of my mind.

Similarly, Jake also found himself wondering if this was the “right place” for him:

My first year or so, I just wasn't interested and I would be like 'I will just go home after class'...there was no one here that I could really relate to that closely, so it was just weird and wasn't connected or sure if this was the right place for me...and then sometimes you walk by and you might see an event taking place, but you really don't know what it is and especially if it's like something with a group of people who are like all of the same race then it's

like ‘oh that’s not for me’ so I just keep going and I know I probably should stick around to find out what it’s about, but you just feel like it’s probably not for you so why bother?

Ultimately, the majority of the participants in this study expressed concerns about the campus environment. Many described it as large and unwelcoming, particularly as it related to transfer students, while others argued that the racial climate on campus plays a significant role in the way they perceived the institution. What these findings suggest is that the participants in this study were faced with numerous environmental factors that impacted their collegiate experience.

#### "Our Experiences Are Not the Same"

Although similarities exist among African American college students, the transfer experience is distinct. Many participants continuously emphasized the challenges that transfer students encounter and often believed that only other transfer students were able to truly understand “the struggle.” Success for these African American transfer students was contextual, institutionally based, and varied from individual to individual. Ursula summarized her transfer experience in the following way, “being a transfer student comes with a lot of extra responsibilities because you have to do everything on your own.” April expressed a similar sentiment and added “people don’t understand that being a transfer student can be hard, especially if you don’t know anyone.”

While some of the participants acknowledged that they did have some of the same experiences as other African Americans students on campus, many believed that all their experiences “were not the same.” Some believed that race was an important

factor, while others felt like race simply did not matter. What seemed to matter more to the majority of these participants was their status as transfer students and in most cases it appeared that transfer status trumped race. Lacey explained:

After awhile, the whole being a minority wasn't even as big of an issue anymore as it was just being in a different environment...I mean it was still there and most of my classes I was one of a few blacks, but it was more adjusting to the new campus as a transfer student and learning my way around and figuring things out as opposed to being a minority.

While there were many things that African American transfer students had in common with their non-transfer counterparts such as difficulty meeting new people, challenging interactions with both faculty and peers, and questioning whether or not they “belonged” in this particular environment, the African American transfer students in this study indicated that there were another set of issues that they were forced to deal with based on their transfer student status. The responses from participants indicated that African American transfer students believed that their transfer status was more of an issue than race on this campus. They also stated that they often felt marginalized not because of race, but because of the educational path they chose. This finding alone has major implications for university policies and practice, as well as future research.

How do African American Transfer Students Describe their Transfer Experience?

The final sub-question of this study asked how African American transfer students described their transfer experience at a traditionally White institution. Before the participants described their transfer experience at this particular institution, many

felt compelled to explain their college choice process. The participants first described why they chose to attend a community college and then addressed their transfer experience at UMCP. They seemed to believe that sharing information about their college choice would help provide a clearer picture of their entire collegiate experience and better explain how they created their path to the baccalaureate degree. All 13 participants in this study identified college costs as one of the primary reasons they chose to attend a community college. Other factors influencing their college choice process included: uncertainty of their major, academic preparation and the need for a transitional step from high school to college.

### *Why I Chose To Attend A Community College*

#### *Costs*

All 13 participants in this study cited finances as one of the primary reasons they chose to attend a community college. Many believed that they could receive a comparable education at the community college for a fraction of the cost. Because they were able to save money, some of the participants believed that they had actually made a better decision than many of their counterparts who chose to attend a four-year institution immediately after high school. Others admitted that while they initially did not plan to attend a community college, their personal and family finances played a significant role in their college choice. Rachel elaborated:

To be honest, my initial plan was not to go to a community college, but I'm just real frugal sometimes and I when I looked at the tuition it was like only a couple of thousand at the community college and like \$20,000 here and I was like 'oh no, I'm going to the community college first'.

Ursula also admitted that she initially did not plan on attending a community college; however, she later realized the financial benefit of doing so:

Actually I knew I wanted to go to a four year university, that was always my original goal, but money was kind of a big issue for me...in the end I ended up saving so much money going to the community college first, so I know it was the best decision for me.

The majority of the participants emphasized the money they were able to save by attending a community college. April, like many of the other participants believed, “it’s the same classes I would be taking here, it was just at a cheaper rate”. Others felt justified in their decision to attend a community college because they believed students often waste time and money because they are unsure of their future plans.

Ursula explained:

You know a lot of people come to a university and spend thousands of dollars trying to decide what they want to do and I just didn’t want to do that...I went to a community college for several reasons, but the main reason was to save money.

Many of the participants in this study believed that their decision to attend a community college was not only economical for them, but for their families as well. It should be noted that several participants in this study mentioned that they provided a significant amount of financial support to both their immediate and extended families. By choosing to attend a community college, these participants believed they were able to fulfill their educational goals while continuing to provide financial assistance to their loved ones.

### *Stepping Stone*

Several participants described their experience at the community college as a “stepping stone.” Some expressed uncertainty about their future goals when they graduated from high school, while others said they simply wanted to improve their study skills and many believed the community college helped them address both of these issues. Jake shared his reason for attending a community college:

I wanted to go to a community college to get all of my core credits, but also to give me some kind of direction in actually trying to figure out what I wanted to major in...I was still a little uncertain of what to expect when I got there...the work was tough and a little demanding, but it allowed me to work and make income to support my family and help with the bills, but also to figure out if college was something that I really wanted to do...it just helped give me some direction.

Victoria also described her experience at the community college and emphasized how it provided her with an opportunity to sharpen her skills before transferring to a four-year institution:

To me, it really helped because it was like a stepping stone to really getting into college and trying to figure out what study habits work best for me and like learning all the different resources on campus and how to use the library...I really didn't know any of those things after high school, so going to the community college was really a good experience for me.

After the participants shared their reasoning behind their college choice process, they then began to describe their transfer experience at the University of



Maryland. During this discussion, the following themes emerged: transferability of credits and services provided for transfer students which included academic advising and the transfer student orientation. It should be noted that while participants were not specifically asked about the transfer student orientation, every participant in this study mentioned it when discussing their academic and transfer experiences. These findings will be discussed in greater detail in this section.

### *Transferability of Credits*

All 13 participants believed a major component of the transfer process included the transferability of credits. Many of them had the majority of their credits transfer from the community college and believed this also played a significant role in their degree completion. Most of the participants discussed the experiences of some of their transfer peers who were not as fortunate and suffered what they described as “significant setbacks” because they lost credits during the transfer process. Others discussed their own frustration of losing credits and the impact it had on their degree completion. Patricia explained:

I was really upset when I found out that all my credits weren't going to transfer. To be honest, I just got this feeling like someone was trying to stop me or pull me backwards...and then I got more upset when I started thinking about how much longer it would take me [to graduate] or how much more money I would end up paying for more classes.

Ursula told a different story, however, she described another piece of the transfer puzzle that she believed often seems to be forgotten:

Fortunately for me all of my credits transferred, but I didn't even find out 'til after the fact that I could get credit for my AP classes from back in high school, no one ever said anything to be about that and I got a three on the exam...I don't think people realize that transfer students from the community college can actually be smart...some of us were honor students, you know?...we just chose a different path, but no one seems to ever ask us if we took AP courses in high school or anything like that...they just assume we all struggled and couldn't get into a 'real school' and that's how we ended up at the community college.

Many of the students described the process of finding out whether certain credits would transfer as being "frustrating," but they all emphasized the need to be aware of this prior to arriving on campus. Some participants, including Tina, believed that not knowing if all your credits transferred could significantly hamper your progress. She explained:

Overall the entire process was actually kind of difficult. It was very frustrating. I mean the application part was easy and family simple, but as far as my credits being transferred, I didn't get all of them and that felt like a major setback...that happens to a lot of us [transfer students] and I think that's why many my friends didn't finish because they worked so hard back there [at the community college] only to find out that they had to retake a course or something and for them it felt like starting all over again.

One of the most interesting findings as it relates to the transferability of credits is that the majority of the participants in this study indicated that they sought

this information themselves without the assistance of an academic advisor. Many talked about visiting various websites, including ARTSYS, the Articulation System of Maryland, which was designed to help students attending a community college within the state of Maryland find out the course equivalents at four-year institutions within the state (UMCP, 2009). A majority of the participants indicated that they used ARTSYS and other online information to not only create a program of study at the four-year institution, but to find out what courses at the community college would be accepted prior to enrolling each semester. Many believed knowing this information beforehand helped increase their chances of a smooth transfer process and the likelihood that most, if not all, of their credits would be accepted.

#### *Services provided for Transfer Students*

When asked about their transfer experiences at UMCP, participants discussed the programs and services they received as a transfer student. Many of the participants expressed mixed feelings about the services offered exclusively for transfer students on this campus. Some believed that there were some “adequate” services that the institution provided, however many did not believe the institution had done a good job in promoting these events or “getting the word out” about programs designed for them. While many of the participants acknowledged that there were “probably more” services available to them as transfer students, they simply were unaware of them, therefore they did not participate. The participants’ responses to questions related to their transfer experience fell into one of two categories: academic advising and transfer student orientation.

### *Academic Advising*

Participants in this study described their interactions with academic advisors once they arrived on campus. Some seemed to have greater expectations than others, yet half of the participants seemed to be pleased overall with the advising they received. Many of these findings were similar to those shared by participants when asked about factors contributing to their degree completion. April discussed her interactions with her academic advisor during her first semester on campus and talked about the assistance she received as an incoming transfer student on campus:

Some of the advisors here were really helpful...I really didn't know what classes I needed to take, so an advisor sat down with me and explained to me what my course program would look like and which classes might be more difficult [than others]...they would also tell you which classes you shouldn't take together and that was really helpful.

Other participants told a different story and felt as though they did not receive the proper advising while on campus. Some compared the advising they received at the community college to that at UMCP, however despite expressing their displeasure, the consensus was that many advisors seem to be overwhelmed and burned out. It should be noted that the advising load of an advisor may vary depending on the major or college, however, many of the participants believed the advisor served an important role, particularly in the transfer process and their assistance was critical in ensuring transfer student success. Lacey explained:

My expectations really weren't met....my advisor had so many students and seemed so stressed and busy that I felt as though he really did not take the

time to advise me well and I suffered because of it...but I think that's a problem everywhere, there are too many students and not enough advisors to help them and in the end the students pay for it.

While some participants admitted that they did not meet with their advisor on a consistent basis, others believed obtaining information and support from these individuals was imperative. Many participants believed that the academic advisor could not only ensure that they were on the right track, but provide guidance to those who were about to make poor choices or who were unsure of their next steps towards graduation. Although many of the participants did not always take advantage of the advising services available, they all acknowledged the need for assistance both during and after the transfer process.

#### *Transfer Student Orientation*

All 13 participants in this study mentioned the transfer student orientation that is held on campus. While there was not a specific question on the interview protocol related to the transfer student orientation, all of the participants mentioned it during their interviews, particularly as it related to their overall transfer experience.

According to the schedule provided by the Orientation Office at the University of Maryland College Park, the Transfer Student Orientation lasts one full day (Appendix F). The opening session consists of a "Welcome to Maryland" presentation by a current faculty member and an introduction to the Office of Off-Campus Housing. This session lasts for approximately one and a half hours, after which all incoming transfer students are then split into groups according to major and spend the rest of the morning meeting their academic advisors, taking placement tests if necessary, and

registering for classes. The Transfer Student Orientation reconvenes in the afternoon and students are able to receive their photo ID, get maps and tours of campus and ask any additional questions.

The participants in this study did not believe that the one day Transfer Student Orientation was “sufficient”. They often commented about the orientation for freshman which lasts two days and includes an overnight stay in the residence halls, a session on becoming involved on campus and sessions with current students involved in various campus clubs and organizations (Appendix G). Jake recalled feeling “cheated” when he found out what took place during the freshman orientation session:

I guess you could say it was helpful [Transfer Student Orientation], but I still feel like I sort of missed out, especially when I talk to my friends who came here as freshmen because after listening to their experience they actually got a chance to see what it was really going to be like to be on campus for an extended period of time...they actually got a feel of not only the campus, but the immediate surrounding community as well and we didn't get any of that at transfer student orientation.

Overall, many expressed displeasure with the brevity of this event, as well as the lack of detailed information they felt they received while attending. Some vaguely remembered the event and believed it was a “waste of time”, while others expressed frustration that this event was not comparable to the orientation session for incoming freshman and felt this sent a clear message that they were somehow “different” or “not as important” as other students on campus. April recalled, “I just felt like there

could have been more, they do more for the freshman...they just took us to the lab, we set up our email accounts, got our ID's and that was about it.”

Some participants believed there was a lot of information provided during transfer student orientation, yet not enough time to digest it and ask questions.

Patricia described her frustration with the transfer student orientation:

I think there was just too much going on [at transfer student orientation]...and you are like confused, then you have to take a placement test so you are stressed out about that, so you cannot really focus on all the stuff they are saying.

Ursula believed that the transfer student orientation should emphasize all services for transfer students; however, she believed the information provided at this event was too broad and that orientation advisors “tried to squeeze too much in” during a short period of time. She later added:

They need to talk more about campus student services and really emphasize the things that are available specifically for transfer students and perhaps there just isn't a lot, but maybe that's part of the problem...I just wasn't really satisfied because they gave you so much information, but never really went into any detail about any of it, so you still ended up being lost and now knowing where to go.

Overall, the participants in this study were displeased with the transfer student orientation on campus. Many believed it there was too much information provided at one time, while others felt rushed through the process because of the condensed schedule. Several of the participants suggested that the Orientation Office conduct

follow up discussions with transfer students once the semester began. Others simply wished they were introduced to more “social activities” on campus as opposed to simply meeting with their advisor and registering for classes. These findings suggest that the transfer student orientation at this particular campus may need to be re-evaluated to ensure that they are meeting the needs of this population and providing pertinent information prior to their arrival on campus.

### Summary of Findings

The intent of this chapter was to present the findings of this study which sought to identify factors that 13 African American transfer students perceived as contributing to their degree completion at the University of Maryland College Park. The first set of findings highlighted themes which emerged from the interviews that were unique and distinct to the 13 African American transfer students in this study. These themes included: parents educational status, the impact of community college attendance, the role of technology and transfer trumps race. The second set of findings identified four factors they believe contributed to their degree completion which included: strong support networks, confidence in their ability to succeed, intrinsic motivation and educational aspirations. Additionally, they examined factors identified in the literature as influencing the persistence of African American students and explored the transfer experiences of the 13 participants. The findings presented in this chapter give voice to the African American transfer student experience and begin to tell the story of their journey once they transferred to a traditionally White institution. In the next chapter, these findings will be discussed and implications for



both practice and future research will be presented in the hopes of improving the transfer process and experience for African American transfer students.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to identify factors contributing to the degree completion of African American transfer students at a traditionally White institution. Using a qualitative methodology, this study sought to answer the following research question:

- I. What are African American transfer students' perceptions of factors contributing to their degree completion at a large, traditionally White institution?
  - a. How do the factors identified in the literature as playing a role in the persistence of African American native students at traditionally White institutions also hold true for African American transfer students?
  - b. How do African American transfer students describe their transfer experience at a traditionally White institution?

Data were collected through individual interviews, a demographic questionnaire and a review of current university documents as they relate to the admission and orientation of transfer students. The sample consisted of 13 participants who were chosen based on pre-determined criteria and their availability to participate in the study. The final sample included 10 female and 3 male students who began their collegiate careers at a community college within the state of Maryland and ultimately graduated from UMCP in either the fall semester of 2007 or the spring semester of 2008.

This chapter begins with a brief summary of the findings discussed in Chapter Four. What follows is a discussion of the findings and how these findings support or differ from previous research on African American students and transfer students. I then briefly turn to a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that informed the study, as well as additional frameworks that could be helpful in examining African American transfer students. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications on policies and practices at this particular institution, recommendations for future research, and the limitations of the study.

#### Discussion of the Findings

Parents' educational status, the impact of community college attendance, the role of technology and the notion that transfer trumps race all emerged as significant themes during conversations and interviews with the participants. These themes helped provide a greater understanding of factors which can impact the experiences of African American transfer students. The participants spoke candidly about how support and guidance from their parents and older siblings, particularly those who possessed college degrees, helped them learn to navigate the collegiate process. Additionally, they spoke in great detail about the role of the community college and technology and how making the decision to attend a community college not only prepared them for transfer, but provided them an opportunity to set educational goals and sharpen their skills before attending a four year institution.

The participants also discussed what could be referred to as the transfer student identity. They shared what it meant to them to be a transfer student from a community college and how they thought other perceived them based on their college

choice. The participants often described the campus environment as being not “transfer friendly” and reported feeling marginalized based on their transfer status. All of these findings proved to be significant as they not only helped illuminate some of the experiences of African American transfer students, but they also emphasize the impact that external factors such as their parents, the institution or the campus environment can have on their successful degree attainment.

In addition to the aforementioned themes, all 13 participants believed they were successful in attaining their baccalaureate degree in large part due to a combination of factors both internal and external to the student. They identified four primary factors which they believed contributed to their degree completion at the University of Maryland College Park. These factors included: strong support networks, confidence in their ability to learn, intrinsic motivation and educational goals. These findings are consistent with previous studies which have examined the experiences of both African American college students and community college transfer students which suggest that multiple factors influence student persistence and degree completion.

A major reoccurring theme throughout this study was that students’ relied heavily on various support networks which they believe greatly contributed to their degree completion. As evidenced by the responses of the participants, for African American transfer students the pathway to the baccalaureate is not an individual journey. All 13 participants indicated receiving some sort of support from their parents, peers or advisors both at the community college and the university. The

participants believed these relationships and interactions had a significant impact on their successful completion of the baccalaureate.

The participants in this study also expressed a confidence in their ability to learn and be successful academically. While some recognized the stigma that they believed was associated with being a community college transfer student on this particular campus, they did not allow others perceptions to negatively influence their views of themselves or their abilities. Previous studies have examined the influence of stereotypes on African American students and its impact on their academic performance (Fries-Britt, 1998; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001). Many of the participants in the current study believed that they were being unfairly judged or stereotyped based on the fact that they attended a community college. They assumed that others questioned their academic ability simply because of their college choice, which is a sentiment often found within transfer student literature (Graham & Hughes, 1994; Kinnick & Kempner, 1988). However, the majority of the participants in this study identified reasons other than academics as to why they chose to attend a community college. Many believed they had the academic capacity to perform at a four-year institution immediately after high school, however, some expressed a desire to either sharpen their skills or decide what field they wanted to pursue before entering a four year institution, hence the reason they attended a community college.

Despite the various reasons for attending a community college, all the students believed that their confidence in their ability to learn ultimately contributed to their degree completion from this institution. Several participants added that they had more confidence in themselves than others had in them and that often felt the need to prove

those individuals wrong and show them that they were capable of succeeding in their new environment. Others simply indicated that upon arriving at the new campus, they truly believed that they had a right to a quality education and were determined to receive it regardless of anyone's perceptions of their academic abilities or strengths. These findings suggest that having confidence in one's own ability to perform can positively influence the degree completion of African American transfer students.

Although the participants in this study identified certain external factors they believe contributed to their success, another theme emerged that was more personal in nature. Many described their ability to encourage and motivate themselves during difficult times. Several of the participants indicated that there were numerous times when they considered leaving the institution or higher education all together. While these students may have at one point considered dropping out, they often described moments where they paused to reassess their current situation and ultimately after much reflection, they used that situation to motivate themselves and ultimately persisted.

Throughout the interviews, they shared things they did to motivate themselves. Often times this included reflecting on their academic journey and the successes they achieved along the way. Some chose to remember their challenging moments and individuals who did not believe that they would be successful and often used those feelings of others doubting their ability to motivate themselves to work even harder to prove them wrong. In addition to reflecting on their own failures and accomplishments, many of these students also reminded themselves of their friends who went directly from high school to a four-year institution, yet dropped out. They

used those situations as examples of what not to do once they arrived on campus and really seemed to learn valuable lessons for others mistakes.

Contrary to earlier studies which suggest attendance at community colleges can “cool out” the educational aspirations of students (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Pascarella et al., 1998), many of the participants in this study had high aspirations and set clear educational goals which they also believed ultimately contributed to their degree completion. Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model identified future plans which included opportunity to transfer to another institution as one of the environmental variables that influence students’ decisions and attitudes about college departure. Several studies also found that transfer students who were successful in attaining the baccalaureate degrees had clear goals before they enrolled at the community college (Kinnick and Kempner, 1988; Piland, 1995).

Many of the participants in this study appeared to be highly motivated students from the beginning. They knew what they hoped to achieve and established clear educational goals. During the interviews they described classmates and friends, particularly those at the community college, who were unsure of declaring a major or unaware of what courses were transferrable to a four-year institution. Most believed that it was imperative to set clear educational goals and to garner specific course information before enrolling in order to prevent loss of time and money. They continuously emphasized the importance of mapping out an educational plan prior to transfer. The participants believed that setting clear educational goals provided them with a greater advantage than their classmates who did not establish similar goals or

develop an educational plan and therefore argued that doing so ultimately helped contribute to their successful degree completion.

When participants were asked to describe their overall experience at this particular institution, many responded with a similar answer which was often “it’s a good school with a strong reputation.” When asked to elaborate some participants hesitated while others openly admitted that they did not have the “best experience” at this institution. Instead of speaking directly to their own experiences, they often talked about the reputation of the institution and the fact that they were proud to have received a degree from a school with such a strong academic history.

As participants began to share more about their own experiences and not necessarily how they described the institution, the findings were less favorable. Many of the participants often expressed mixed feelings about their time spent at this institution. While some were pleased with both their academic and social experiences, many felt as though they did not have the full “College Park experience.” When asked what was meant by the “College Park experience” they often talked about their desire to be more involved in the campus community; however, because they were often not actively involved in extracurricular activities, they often reported feeling as though they somehow missed out on the “traditional” college experience. In addition to not feeling as though they had a true college experience, many participants also described feeling as though they never truly belonged at the institution which is consistent with previous studies examining transfer students (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Dowd, 2003; Laanan, 2001, 2003; Townsend & Wilson,



2006). Several even stated that they felt like only “half a student” while attending this institution.

While some of participants acknowledged only participating in the academic scene on campus such as going to class or working with various study groups, many expressed a desire to become more socially connected. Despite wanting to become more involved on campus, the participants in this study stated they simply did not know where to go to find information about programs and events. Some voiced their displeasure about the way information was disseminated to students, particularly transfer students; however, for those individuals who did find information and attended various events on campus, they described feeling out of place once they arrived and often experienced difficulty trying to break into new groups.

Despite some the challenges experienced by these students, all of the participants agreed that they made a “good decision” to attend a school with a strong academic reputation. Many reported being frustrated about not knowing where to go to get the necessary information specific to transfer students; however, they all expressed pride in attaining a degree from this particular institution. Though their experiences varied, they seemed pleased with their overall transfer experience at this institution, yet they continuously placed more value on the degree attained versus their own experiences.

#### Discussion of the Study’s Framework

This study was guided by the work of several bodies of literature which examined student persistence and success. They included: Padilla’s Model of Minority Student Success (1997), Bean and Metzner’s Nontraditional Student

Attrition Model (1985) and Sedlacek's Noncognitive Variables (1976). While each model contained different elements relevant to the population being examined, Padilla's model was most fully applied to this study as it identified the same barriers found in the transfer literature that students must overcome in order to be successful. All three of these models were useful in identifying factors that African American transfer students perceived as contributing to their degree completion. They each emphasized the importance of having strong support networks including family, peers and individuals at the institution which was something often reiterated by the participants in this study. Additionally, these models were helpful because they examined both internal and external variables, including the individual and the institution, and their influence on student persistence.

Although elements of the aforementioned models were used to develop an integrated framework to examine the experiences of African American transfer students, other theories or models provide insight into the experiences of the students in this study. Several were particularly useful after analyzing the data. They include: Schlossberg's Transition Theory, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, and the influence of cultural capital.

#### *Schlossberg's Transition Theory*

Schlossberg's Transition Theory defines transition as "an event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 6). This theory sought to explain how and why people react in a different way to certain transitions and why someone can react different at different points in their life (Schlossberg, 1994). Schlossberg's research identifies four factors, better

known as the 4 S's, which affect an individual's transition. They include: situation, self, support, and strategies. Situation focuses on the type of transition the individual is experiencing. Self focuses on the individual in transition and whatever characteristics they bring to the transition. Support refers to the network of support which the individual will call on during the transition and strategy describes how the individual copes with the transition. Because transfer students are in fact in a state of transition, this theory might be useful to examine how transfer students prepare for and handle moving from one institution to another. Additionally, this theory also examines the support systems of the individual while in transition. The findings of the current study indicate that African American transfer students believed having a strong support network was critical to their success, therefore using this theory would allow for further exploration of different types of support networks and their influence on the students in transition. Additionally, it may be a useful framework to examine how and why transfer students may experience the transition from a community college in a different way than native students who transition from high school to college.

### *Self-Efficacy*

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1977, 1982) explores the concept of self-efficacy and defines it as an individuals' belief in their ability to succeed in certain situation. This work suggests that an individuals' sense of self-efficacy can play a significant role in the way they approach certain goals, tasks or challenges (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's work differentiates between self- efficacy and self-esteem and argues that self-efficacy focuses more so on the person's perception that they can

achieve a specified goal or complete a certain task, not necessarily how they perceive their own self-worth. The concept of self-efficacy might serve as a useful framework to consider when examining African American transfer students because it allows the research to examine students' belief about their abilities prior to transfer. In this study, many students expressed confidence in their academic abilities and knew that they would ultimately attain their baccalaureate degree. They identified this confidence as one of the major factors contributing to their degree completion. An examination of transfer students' sense of self-efficacy over time might allow researchers to identify methods or behaviors that support this development and positively influence persistence.

### *Cultural Capital*

The concept of cultural capital was developed by Bourdieu (1973, 1977, 1986) in an attempt to explain differences in educational outcomes. This research argued that individuals who possess cultural capital have a greater likelihood of succeeding than an individual who comes from a background with less knowledge and fewer experiences or connections. Oldfield (2007) defined cultural capital as “the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily” (p. 2). While learning how to navigate the collegiate system can be difficult, the majority of the participants in the current study were predisposed to college prior to their arrival on campus as their parents and older siblings had previously attended college and attained baccalaureate degrees and in several cases advanced degrees. Given the demographics of the group examined in this study, it

may be beneficial for future research to use cultural capital as a framework by which to examine transfer students. As the nation continues to experience tough economic times, enrollments at community colleges have increased dramatically in part due to their low costs (AACC, 2009). If this pattern continues students attending these institutions may no longer be primarily first generation college students and could arrive on campus with greater knowledge of college rules, norms and processes. To that end, it may be useful to examine the role that cultural capital plays in their ability to navigate the college going and transfer process to ultimately attain their baccalaureate degree.

### Implications

It is essential that policymakers and campus administrators thoroughly understand the experiences of African American transfer students to assure their success within postsecondary education. The richness of data collected in this study revealed significant findings with implications for both community colleges and four-year institutions as they pertain to providing direction and support for African American transfer students. The following is a discussion of these implications, as well as recommendations for practice and policies which may lead to an increase in degree completion of African American transfer students on this campus.

#### *Implications for Practice and Campus Policies*

##### *Technology*

Many of the other participants indicated that the internet was the primary tool for gaining information. This has huge implications for academic advising both at the community colleges and four-year institutions. If students are getting most of their

information off the internet, it is imperative that institutions ensure that the most up-to-date information is posted on their websites. Additionally, new and innovative ways of advising such as online advising sessions or chat room discussions may be more appealing and accommodating to this particular student population as they are not frequently on campus and may not know where to go to obtain certain information.

Several studies have noted the importance of infusing technology in higher education by providing information to students via the campus websites (Green, 2000; Miller, Martineau & Clark, 2004). Additionally, the work of DeLaTorre (2007) stresses the importance of providing web-based information, particularly for community college transfer students, who may be unwilling or unable to come to campus to meet with college advisors and staff. The transfer students in this study often expressed apprehension about going to certain offices to seek information; therefore they preferred searching for information on their own via the web. This suggests that transfer students might be better informed and campus programs and other activities better attended, particular by this student population, if information was not only shared on campus through posters and flyers, but also via electronic announcements and postings on social networking pages.

#### *Opportunities for Networking and Exchange Between Transfer Students*

The participants in this study expressed a desire to meet and network with other transfer students. When many of them described their peer groups, they often talked about other transfer students they met in class or recognized from the community college. However, several participants expressed a desire a more formal

setting where all transfer students could convene and meet one another. They believed that other transfer students provided the best insight, advice and support for them because they were having similar experiences on campus. These participants also found it helpful to talk with students who had transferred to the institution before them as they often provided valuable information about who to talk to about certain issues on campus or where they could find additional information.

These findings suggest that it may be beneficial to establish an office or area on campus specifically for transfer students. Similar to cultural centers which often provide a safe space for students of color to meet, this space would allow transfer students to come together and meet other transfer students, as well as obtain information that is pertinent to the transfer student population. Patton (2006) found that having a designated space provides “refuge, comfort and support,” particularly for students of color, and often helped students feel respected and valued (p. 644). Additionally, these designated spaces also provided a place for positive interactions between students, faculty and staff (Patton, 2006). While some participants did mention the Off-Campus Student Involvement office, they did not believe it provided information specifically for transfer students. The participants were very explicit in stating that there was a difference between those students who simply do not live on campus and transfer students. They recognized that their needs often differed from the needs of native students and even commuter students; therefore they wanted to see more programs and services that were exclusively designed for and tailored to meet their needs.

## *Housing*

The participants in this study were not directly asked about on-campus housing; however, many mentioned it during their discussion of their social experiences. Some indicated that they believed they had a more difficult time meeting other students because they did not live on campus. Although on-campus housing is offered to transfer students, it is on a first come first serve basis and often times all of the housing slots are filled by incoming freshmen or returning students leaving few spaces available for transfer students. Of those students who expressed a desire to live on campus, many believed that the university should hold a designated number of slots specifically for transfer students.

While the majority of the participants in this study indicated that they had no desire to live on campus, they all felt they deserved to have the opportunity to do so if they choose. April recalled an orientation advisor telling her “as a transfer student you’re entitled to everything everybody else is entitled to, except housing.” She remembered feeling angered by that statement and thought to herself “why can’t I live on campus like everyone else?” She later followed up with the Office of Residence Life and found out that statement was inaccurate; however, she was told that there were no rooms available and she could be placed on a waiting list. She described feeling as though perhaps the orientation leaders’ comments were in fact accurate and while the institution says they make housing opportunities available for all students, the fact remains that it is more difficult for transfer students to obtain on campus housing compared to incoming freshmen and current students. Ursula also expressed her frustration with the housing situation for transfer students and added, “I



just don't think it's fair that we are students and pay the same fees like everyone else, but can't live on campus...I just feel like they need to at least give us [transfer students] more assistance in finding housing.”

It is evident by the comments made by the participants that on-campus housing for transfer students is something that should be considered by the institution. While the majority of the students admitted that they probably would not have lived on campus, they each believed that not having an “equal” opportunity to do so sent a message that they were somehow not valued or as important as current students or incoming freshmen. It is imperative that administrators are aware of the impact of such policies as they may contribute to transfer students feeling as though they are unwanted or do not really belong on this campus (Davies & Casey, 1999; Kodama, 2002).

### *Recommendations for Future Research*

#### *Impact of Community College Attendance*

Despite what students described as “negative perceptions” that people have about community colleges, many of them expressed a sense of gratitude and appreciation for their experiences at these institutions. Several added that they established some of their closest friendships while attending the community college. Others spoke candidly about the “life skills” they acquired while attending the community college and it was there that they learned the importance of relationship building. When asked if they had an opportunity to change their course and attend a four-year college first instead of attending a community college, all 13 participants responded emphatically “no!” They all believed their experiences at the community

college helped prepare them for what they experienced after transferring and for “the real world.” Victoria shared her experience at the community college and added, “if I had to do it all over again, I would have stayed on the same path. I made lasting friendships there [at the community college] and they really helped me get my life back on track.” Lacey described it best as she explained what attending a community college meant to her:

I think the community college does much more than provide you with an education. They give you what people need for their day-to-day lives. They help you build relationships...they go beyond just your education, but who you are as a person and they are genuinely interested in you. They listen to you and want to get a better understanding of who you are and what you need...that’s more than you could ever get from a big university and that’s something that is priceless.

It is obvious by the sentiments expressed by these students that their community college experience had a powerful impact on their lives. It would be extremely useful to examine the impact of these institutions on college students in an effort to better understand the role these types of institutions play in helping to facilitate transfer and encourage student success. Additionally, many participants spoke of the support they received both prior to and during the transfer process, therefore it would be beneficial to explore the steps taken by community colleges to ensure that their students experience a seamless transition to the four-year institution and ultimately attain their baccalaureate degrees.

### *Stigma of Transferring from a Community College*

Despite how the participants viewed their experiences at the community college, many reported feeling discriminated against, unwelcomed and as if they were not fully accepted or acknowledged as a “real student” at this particular institution because of their college choice. Several discussed what they described as the “stigma” of being a transfer student at this particular institution. Lacey explained, “I think there is like this stigma with people and community colleges because they think you aren’t getting the same level of education at a two-year college.” Many of the participants reported feeling that individuals questioned their academic ability and whether they belonged on this campus. They described conversations with native students about what it meant to be a transfer student on this campus. Some indicated that the native students they spoke with believed that transfer students somehow “snuck in the back door” of the institution and did not necessarily meet all of the university requirements to gain full admission. Victoria added, “many people think that just because you went to a community college then that means you are stupid or like you weren’t smart enough to get into a ‘real school’...it's like they think all community colleges are like nothing more than remedial education.”

These findings reveal that transfer students believe there is a stigma attached to them simply because of their college choice. Despite the fact that all 13 participants in this study attained their baccalaureate degree from this institution, they still questioned how others would perceive or interpret their time spent at the community college. Although they were successful in transferring from the community college to a large, four-year institution, they believed that their transcript

may be viewed by others as being tarnished because they did not begin and end their collegiate journey at the same institution. Future research should examine the effect this stigma has on transfer students and if it negatively influences their academic performance and ultimately their persistence. Additionally, we need to know more about the attitudes and behaviors of faculty, staff, administrators which perpetuate this stigma and possibly impede transfer student success.

### *Transfer Trumps Race and Institutional Climates*

Based on what is already known about African American students from prior studies, the assumption was that it would be easy to draw many parallels between these students and African American transfer students; however, the population examined in this study was unique in that they shared dual identities. Not only were they transfer students, but they were also African American students attending a traditionally White institution. While the participants in this study believed they deserved to be on campus and that they were academically prepared and would ultimately receive their baccalaureate degree from this institution, they reported feeling marginalized based on their transfer status. Similar to research conducted on African American college students, the participants in this study reported similar challenges when arriving on campus; however, they believe they experienced additional challenges unrelated to their racial background, but rather because of their admission status. This has major implications not only for those studying transfer students, but also for those studying racial issues on campus. A more in-depth look at the racial identity of these students is warranted and may provide a deeper lens by which to examine the dual identities that these participants share.

In addition to feeling marginalized on campus, previous studies have found that some African American students attending traditionally White institutions report having a difficult time adjusting to their new environment (Feagin, Vera & Imani, 1996; Hinderlie & Kenny, 2002; Smedley, Myers & Harrell, 1993). The examination of the adjustment of community college transfer students has produced similar results (Laanan, 1996, 2001; Townsend, 1995; Townsend, McNerny & Arnold, 1993). Just as some African American students view traditionally White institutions as unsupportive and unfriendly environments (Cuyjet, 1998; Ellis, 2001; Swim et al., 2003; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004), the African American transfer students in this study also viewed this institution as unwelcoming and often described it as being “not transfer friendly.” When asked why she described the campus this way, April explained, “they just have this ‘hey, you’re not smart enough because you went to a community college first’ type of mentality and so they just look at you a little different because you are a transfer student.” These types of observations by the participants often resulted in them questioning their decision to transfer to this particular institution.

Many of the participants in this study believed that they were not welcomed at this institution. Based on the literature regarding African American students attending TWI’s we know this feeling is not uncommon, however these findings suggest that these feelings are even more prevalent for community college transfer students and must therefore be addressed. Future studies should begin to explore the impact of institutional climates on transfer students. While there have been studies which examine campus racial climates, the participants in this study often referred to

this campus' climate as being unwelcoming to transfer students. As the number of community college transfer students admitted continues to increase, particularly on this campus, further exploration of the impact of the campus environment on this study population is also warranted.

### Limitations

As with any approach to research, there are several limitations to a case study design. One limitation of this particular study is that it examines African American transfer students attending a large, traditionally White, research institution in the Mid-Atlantic region. The findings of this study are not generalizable to all populations of transfer students, nor do they represent the experiences of all African American transfer students, particularly those who chose to attend a different type of institution. Patton (1990) argued, however, that generalization is not the ultimate goal in qualitative inquiry. Instead, he suggested that the purpose of qualitative research is to "provide perspective" (p.491) in a way so that the findings may be generalized back to a particular framework or conceptual model. Although this study may not be generalizable to all transfer students, it provides deeper insight into the experiences of African American transfer students; moreover, it also examines the role of race on transfer students' experiences at a traditionally White institution, which is something that much of the prior research on transfer students has failed to explore.

Another limitation of this study is that it examines the perceptions of a group of students attending the same institution. Based on the responses of the participants in this study, institutional factors such as the campus environment and racial climate can play a role in the degree completion of African American transfer

students; however, the impact of these factors may vary depending on the type, size and location of the institution and its commitment to the transfer student population. Lastly, this study examined students after they graduated from a particular institution. Their perceptions and recollection of experiences at the time of their interviews may differ from their feelings upon initially arriving at this institution. This study is a summary of the experiences they chose to share and their perceptions of certain experiences or encounters may have changed over time at this particular institution.

### Final Thoughts

This study reveals that African American transfer students identify multiple factors which contributed to their degree completion at a traditionally White institution which include: strong support networks, confidence in their ability to learn, intrinsic motivation and educational goals. Both scholars and practitioners need to further examine these factors, as well as identify those practices which impede transfer student success. Moreover, the role of the institution must also be explored to ensure that the transfer process is seamless and does not deter students from successfully transferring or attaining their baccalaureate degree. From this line of research campus administrators can improve the programs and services currently provided to transfer students both during the transfer process and while they matriculate at the four-year institution.

Additionally, although there is an abundance of research on African American college students, recent data suggests that many of these students are now beginning their collegiate careers at community colleges. If this pattern continues, it is likely that there will be an increase in the number of African American transfer students

arriving on four-year campuses. This also emphasizes the need for continued exploration of transfer students in general, as well as subgroups within the transfer student population.

### Conclusion

During these tough economic times, we are reminded of the importance of higher education and the financial, personal and professional benefits of attaining a college degree. In an article entitled “Consider community college: It’s no longer Americas best kept secret,” Dr. Jill Biden, the wife of Vice President Joe Biden, reiterates the important role these institutions play in not only educating and training a skilled workforce, but preparing individuals to successfully transfer to four-year institutions (Forbes, 2009). As President Obama’s administration has now focused its educational priorities on ensuring that all Americans have an opportunity to pursue higher education, there is no better time to respond to the national call to increase the number of college graduates in this country by 2020. In order to meet this challenge, it is important to consider the numerous pathways to the baccalaureate, one of which is the community college transfer process. Improving the transfer pipeline and ensuring that these students are able to make a seamless transition to four-year institutions can lead to an increase in the number of Americans successfully attaining college degrees and significantly impact the nations’ ability to compete globally. A large part of this success will come from continuing to examine the transfer student population and understanding the students currently in the pipeline and their experiences as they transfer and matriculate at four-year institutions.



## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Email to Potential Participants

Dear Recent Graduate,

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study focusing on African American transfer students. This study seeks to better understand the experiences of African American transfer students who recently graduated from the University of Maryland College Park. If you are a recent graduate of the University and you attended a community college in the state of Maryland prior to UMCP, then you are eligible to participate in this study! Please note that students who transferred to UMCP from a community college outside the state of Maryland may also be eligible to participate in this study.

In order to participate in this study, you will need to agree to one interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. This interview will take place during the 2008 fall semester. I will ask questions during the interviews which will allow me to learn about your experiences as an African American transfer student at the University of Maryland and what factors contributed to the successful completion of your baccalaureate degree. All interviews will occur on campus at a time and location that will prove convenient for you. If meeting off campus proves more convenient, a location will be identified. In appreciation for your participation, a \$25 gift certificate to Target will be given to you upon completion of the interview.

All interviews will be digitally recorded, however the data will remain confidential and used only for research purposes. In addition, participants will be asked to select a pseudonym that will be used when reporting the findings.

If you are interested in participating in this study please reply to this email. Your participation is appreciated and important to the success of this research study.

Sincerely,

Toyia K. Younger, Doctoral Candidate  
University of Maryland College Park  
College of Education  
Department of Ed. Leadership, Higher  
Education and Intl. Education

## APPENDIX B: Letter to Study Participants

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study focusing on African American transfer students. This study seeks to better understand the experiences of African American transfer students who recently graduated from the University of Maryland College Park.

In order to participate in this study, you will need to agree to one interview lasting approximately 90 minutes. This interview will take place during the summer 2008 semester. I will ask questions during the interviews which will allow me to learn about your experiences as an African American transfer student at the University of Maryland. All interviews will occur on campus at a time and location that will prove convenient for you. If meeting off campus proves more convenient, a location will be identified. In appreciation for your participation, a \$25 gift certificate will be given to you upon completion of the interview.

All interviews will be digitally recorded, however the data will remain confidential and used only for research purposes. In addition, participants will be asked to select a pseudonym that will be used when reporting the findings.

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact Toyia K. Younger at [tyounger@umd.edu](mailto:tyounger@umd.edu). Your participation is appreciated and important to the success of this research study. If you have any additional questions about this study, please feel free to direct any them to my advisor, Dr. Sharon Fries-Britt at [sfries@umd.edu](mailto:sfries@umd.edu).

Sincerely,

Toyia K. Younger, Doctoral Candidate  
University of Maryland College Park  
College of Education  
Department of Ed. Leadership, Higher  
Education and Intl. Education

APPENDIX C: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

Please complete the questionnaire by circling, checking or writing in the appropriate answers below. It is not necessary for you to write your name on this form. All information will be reported as part of a group profile.

1. Gender                    \_\_\_ Female                    \_\_\_ Male
2. Age \_\_\_\_\_
3. Student Status            \_\_\_ Full-time                    \_\_\_ Part-time
4. Place of birth \_\_\_\_\_
5. Community college previously attended \_\_\_\_\_
6. Was attending a four-year institution a goal before you started attending the community college?    \_\_\_ Yes    \_\_\_ No
7. When did you transfer to UMCP \_\_\_\_\_
8. Did you apply to other colleges? If so, please list them below.  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Did you complete an associates degree prior to transferring?    \_\_\_ Yes    \_\_\_ No
10. How many credits had you obtained prior to transferring to UMCP? \_\_\_\_\_
11. What is your major?    \_\_\_\_\_
12. What are your plans following graduation?  
\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D: Interview Protocol

This study seeks to identify and understand the factors that influence persistence to the baccalaureate degree for African American transfer students.

The primary research questions guiding this study are:

1. What are African American transfer students' perceptions of factors contributing to their degree completion at a large, traditionally white institution?
  - Throughout your college experience at UMCP, what types of services and programs were most beneficial to you as a transfer student?
    - How did you learn about these programs or services?
  - Discuss your relationships with individuals within the campus community. (i.e. administrators, staff and faculty).
    - Which individuals were most helpful to you throughout your college experience?
    - How were specific people helpful?
    - How did you identify these people?
  - Throughout your experiences at UMCP, what techniques or strategies did you use to navigate the collegiate system, i.e. learning institutional policies (registering for classes, etc), finding your way around campus, identifying specific people and offices on campus?
2. Do the same factors identified in the literature as playing a role in the persistence of African American native students at traditionally white institutions also hold true for African American transfer students?
  - How would you describe the University of Maryland campus environment as it relates to transfer students?
  - Do you believe there is a stigma associated with attending or transferring from a community college? If so, how is this stigma manifested?
  - Describe your experiences as an African American student on this campus?
  - Have you ever experienced anything that you attributed to your race/ethnicity?
  - Describe your social interactions with other African American students on campus? With White students?
  - Describe your interactions with faculty, both inside and outside of the classroom.

3. How do African American transfer students describe their overall experience at a traditionally white institution?

- What has been your biggest surprise since you transferred?
- Describe your experiences at UMCP? What have they been like?
- If you had to do it all over again would you have chosen to transfer to UMCP?
  - What has been the most positive or beneficial experience or interaction you have had since attending UMCP? What has been the most negative or least beneficial experience or interaction?
  - If you were advising a fellow African American student at a two-year college about transferring to UMCP, what would you tell him or her?

Wrap Up Questions:

- If you had an opportunity to talk with the President of this institution, what would you want him to know about your transfer experience and the time you have spent at UMCP?
- If you were in a position of authority at UMCP, what if anything would you do to make the university a more friendly and inviting campus for transfer students? For African American students?
- Is there anything else you would like for me to know about your experience at UMCP?

## APPENDIX E: Transfer Student Application Materials



### Applying as a Transfer Student

University of Maryland seeks transfer applicants who have shown success in their post-secondary academic work, and who offer diverse backgrounds, geographic origins, and personal experiences. Students who graduated from high school and subsequently completed at least 12 semester hours or 18 quarter hours during a regular term (this excludes summer school) at a regionally accredited college or university are considered transfer applicants.

The Admissions Committee considers each application for transfer admission individually, reviewing the student's academic record, grades received in all college-level courses, completion of Fundamental Studies English and mathematics, and the rigor of the student's academic program. When an applicant has attended more than one institution, a cumulative average for all previous college work attempted will be computed. To be considered, course work must have been completed at a regionally accredited college or university.

Students who have completed fewer than 30 semester or 45 quarter hours will also have their high school academic records and SAT I and/or ACT scores reviewed. Maryland residency, special talents and/or abilities, personal background, and Maryland alumni/ae affiliation may be taken into consideration.

Articulated transfer programs are available at each Maryland community college. An articulated transfer program is a list of courses that best prepare applicants for a particular course of study at the University of Maryland. Applicants who take appropriate courses specified in the articulated program and earn acceptable grades are guaranteed transfer with no loss of credit.

In accordance with Maryland Higher Education Commission and Board of Regents transfer policies, applicants from Maryland public institutions are, in some instances, given special consideration. Students transferring from other University System of Maryland institutions who wish to receive additional consideration should submit their high school transcript and SAT I and/or ACT scores.

Be sure to check out the application checklist and deadlines on the "Related Links" menu. For Transfer Student FAQs visit [www.transferfaqs.umd.edu](http://www.transferfaqs.umd.edu).

## APPENDIX F: Transfer Student Orientation Schedule

# University of Maryland New Student Orientation

Welcome to Transfer Student Orientation! You checked in this morning in the Cole Field House lobby. Orientation Advisors will direct you to your first session, leaving from the Cole Field House concourse. Enjoy your program!

8:30-8:45am                      Welcome to Maryland  
Picture yourself at UM! Get to know how you can be a successful new Terp as a UM faculty member shares tips and thoughts about university life in and out of the classroom.

8:45-9:00am                      Commuter Involvement and Housing  
Get an insider's perspective on making connections on campus with the Office of Off-Campus Student Involvement and Off-Campus Housing Services. We will show you how to get the most out of the services available to off-campus students.

9:15-9:40am                      Terp Connections  
Connect with your Orientation Advisor and your new school! Get a student's perspective on life here at Maryland and tips on how to make a successful transition.

9:45am-4:30pm Meet Your College/Advising and registration  
Meet some of the advisors and faculty in your college. Also, learn about college requirements, facilities, and programs. You will receive advising and register for classes. After you receive your schedule, please go to the Student Services counter in the Mitchell Building to take your student ID card picture.

### Lunch at Your College

1:00-4:30pm    Orientation Closing  
Rejoin with the Orientation Staff in the *1102 Cole Student Activities Building (Cole Field House)* after you pick up your photo ID card during this informal drop-in session. Get a campus map, and reconnect with the OAs and other university staff to find out any additional information that you may need regarding your transition to the University of Maryland. Address any additional concerns you may have after your day is complete!

Open House at Off-Campus Housing Services  
Get answers to your off-campus housing search questions with the staff of Off-Campus Housing Services. Search the OCH101 and Roommate Finder databases; peruse the information resources; and learn how to live off-campus successfully. Located at 1110 Stamp Student Union.

APPENDIX G: Freshman Student Orientation Schedule

# University of Maryland

## New Student Orientation

Welcome to New Student Orientation! You checked in this morning in the Cole Field House lobby. Orientation Advisors will direct you to your first session, leaving from the Cole Field House concourse. Enjoy your program!

- 9:00-9:55am                      Welcome to Maryland and Terp Connections  
Picture yourself at UM! Get to know current students, fellow future Terps and begin your transition to becoming a Maryland Terrapin!
- 10:00-12:00pm                  Meet your College
- 12:05-12:40pm                  Living and Eating Like a Terp (Resident Life and Dining Services)
- 12:40-1:25pm                      Lunch  
Join your fellow Terps for lunch in the South Campus Dining Hall.
- 1:30-2:00pm                      Getting Involved at Maryland (Office of Campus Programs)
- 2-3:30pm                              Campus Essentials  
Meet students outside you major as you learn how to get around and discover some of the historical and significant landmarks around campus.
- 3:30-4:00pm                      Professor's Perspective  
Meet with your family as a UM faculty member shares tips and thoughts about university life inside and outside of the classroom.
- 4:00-4:30pm                      My Maryland Fair (Involvement Fair)
- 4:15-5:45pm                      Check-in at Cumberland Hall and Free Time (Parking in Lot 9)
- 5:45pm                                  Students meet outside Cumberland Hall for dinner  
From this point forward, the program is only for students.
- 6:00-6:45pm                      Student Dinner
- 7:00-8:15pm                      Skits and Life at Maryland  
Sit back and enjoy skits written and performed by your OAs addressing real life issues facing students at UM. Following is a small group session where students can ask *real* questions to *real* students.
- 9:00-10:00pm                      Epley Recreation Center  
Swim, play basketball or volleyball, take a tour of the Rec Center or just hang out and talk.
- 10:15-midnight                  Movie and Late Night Chill Sessions  
Meet and chill with current students from the Black Student Union, Campus Programs, Greek Life and Resident Life. Meets in the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor lounges of Cumberland.



Day 2

7:45am- Meet outside Cumberland

8-9:00am-Breakfast in Stamp Student Union Food Court (obtain breakfast ticket from your Orientation Advisor).

9:00-1:30- Advising and Registration  
Lunch with your group.

1:30-2:30- Complete Campus Essentials and Testudo Tradition.

Program ends at 2:30pm.

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