Authentic Narratives of Successful Pathways to Undergraduate Completion for Black Men

Tara M. Jones
Abilene Christian University, tmj17a@acu.edu

This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the College of Graduate and Professional Studies of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

Nannette W. Glenn, Ph.D.

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Dr. Nannette Glenn, Dean of the
College of Graduate and Professional
Studies

Date: March 20, 2023

Dissertation Committee:

Bryan Patterson

———————————————————

Dr. Bryan Patterson, Chair

Simone Elias

———————————————————

Dr. Simone Elias

Linda Wilson-Jones

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Dr. Linda Wilson-Jones

Abilene Christian University

School of Educational Leadership

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of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to all the African American men who have had the courage to overcome obstacles and achieve their dream of academic success through hard work and persistence. Also, to all the young people dreaming of pursuing life changing education despite challenges, don't ever give up on your dreams. There is always a pathway that can lead to your fulfillment if you believe in yourself. Stay motivated to do what it takes, and surround yourself with those who care, love, support you. Find those who will wrap their arms around you and believe in you to your success. To my grandchildren, always believe in yourself and your dreams as I believe in you. You are my pride, my joy, and my legacy. I know the world will become a better place because you are here. Share your love and kindness with all.

Acknowledgments

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" Philippians 4:13. "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that was with me." 1 Corinthians 15:10. These two verses carried me through many hours and days when I wondered if completion of this degree was going to be possible for me. I am proud to say I am completing this during my 60th year of life, proof it is never too late to follow and achieve your dream. This journey was not without what I call speed bumps: two surgeries, one ICU stay, two rounds of COVID19, loss of employment due to the pandemic, two moves, and the loss of three beloved pets. Of course, the positives were the birth of four amazing grandchildren, a new job, adjusting to remote work, and the wonderful support system gained through this process.

Thank you goes to my brilliant chair, Dr. Bryan Patterson for your endless patience, wise guidance, and inspirational encouragement. I will be forever grateful of your acceptance of me, my work, and my passion for helping others. Thank you to my committee members Dr. Simone Elias and Dr. Linda Wilson-Jones for your insight and recommendations that strengthened my work and my leadership. Dr. McMichael, I appreciate your guidance and encouragement along this journey. To the courageous and inspiring research participants, thank you for your willingness to share your authentic stories of academic success. By sharing your journey, academic leaders and others will learn what pathways to academic success for Black men in U.S. education look like and how we can all better serve and support other coming behind you.

To my wonderful family, I love you all and could not have done this without your encouragement and support. To my children, Lauren, (Spencer), Jared, (Samantha), and Hannah – your love, belief in me and continual encouragement kept me going. Thank you for blessing

Abstract

This qualitative narrative study examined the authentic lived experiences of eight Black male participants who successfully completed their college undergraduate degree at a private college in the southeast United States. The participants were recruited via LinkedIn, a professional social media, networking site. It explored family, K-12, co-curricular, and community factors that contributed to the academic success of the participants throughout their educational journey. This study drew upon Harper's (2012) antideficit theory framing the study from the lens of the positive aspects of their academic experiences rather than focusing on the negative aspects of Black men that graduate college at the lowest rate of any subpopulation. This positive lens structured the one main research question, how did they describe their educational experience as a Black man. This question was followed by a series of open ended, semistructured questions to allow the participants to share their authentic stories. The interviews were conducted via Zoom allowing participants to confidentially share their authentic lived experiences. The eight participants disclosed significant influences leading to three categories or themes: Influential, Systemic, and Personal Investment. These themes emerged from their stories through analysis of the data highlighting the intrinsic and extrinsic support. Recommended actions provided to assist K-12 and college-level administrators in designing strategies for preparing and supporting Black men on their pathway to successful college completion.

Keywords: Black men, college completion, degree completion, retention, academic success, educational experiences

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Americans often refer to higher education as the great equalizer. Social mobility is an indicator of success for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who complete their undergraduate degrees (Carter, 2018; O'Brien & Moules, 2007). Equal access to higher education in the United States for Black students has a long and forced history. The National Center for Education Statistics data from 2008–2013 supports that disparity still exists for Black college students' retention and graduation rates. While access to higher education has changed, one subpopulation of society, Black men, statistically has the lowest college graduation rate of all student populations, presenting a significant social and economic inequality for this group of Americans. The report from the Governor's Commission on Black Males (Maryland State Department of Education, 2007) acknowledged that not all children are valued equally, and African American children are valued the least by not recognizing their unlimited potential. A review of Black Americans in higher education will provide a glimpse into the history of this longstanding issue.

In 1799, John Chavis was the first Black male on record to attend a U.S. college (Othow, 2001). Still, it was not until 1823 that Alexander Twilight became the first known African American to graduate from a college in the United States (Kendi, 2012). During that time, few African Americans could access and successfully navigate higher education in the United States. Following 1812 until the civil war victory, very few Black free men attended school, and enslaved people were denied literacy (Gavins, 2009). After the abolition of slavery with the 13th Amendment in 1865, schools and colleges for Black citizens rose, but so did share cropping, which many considered the new slavery, violence, and segregation (Gavins, 2009). Gavins (2009) noted the Black men that sought education did so in an environment of White supremacy

that held no regard for their disenfranchisement or unequal opportunities. The Jim Crow laws enacted a second-class citizen system on Black people, especially in the Southern states. These laws made access to education virtually impossible for Black citizens and made the 13th and 14th amendments to the Constitution invalid from 1877 to the mid-1950s (*Jim Crow Laws | Causes and Effects | Britannica*, 2022). The Truman Report on Higher Education in 1947 made sweeping and progressive statements about the changes needed for American education. These included "the extension of free public education through the first two years of college for all youth who can profit from such education; the elimination of racial and religious discrimination" (*Statement by the President Making Public a Report of the Commission on Higher Education | Harry S. Truman*, n.d.). With this declaration, hopes of racial equality in education would soon prevail.

It was not until the 1950s that the Supreme Court ordered universities such as the University of Florida and the University of Georgia to enroll Black students (Kendi, 2012). Colleges began integrating their campuses after the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, case in 1954. The 1960s brought social unrest and protests to college campuses over racial equality. By 1980 only 11% of Black men in America had attended 4 years of college compared to 25.5% of White men (Jaynes & Williams, 1989). From 1980 to 2010, Black male college enrollment increased, but the number compared to White men remains staggeringly disproportionate (Harper & Harris, 2012; see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Growth in College Enrollments, All Degree Levels, 1980–2010
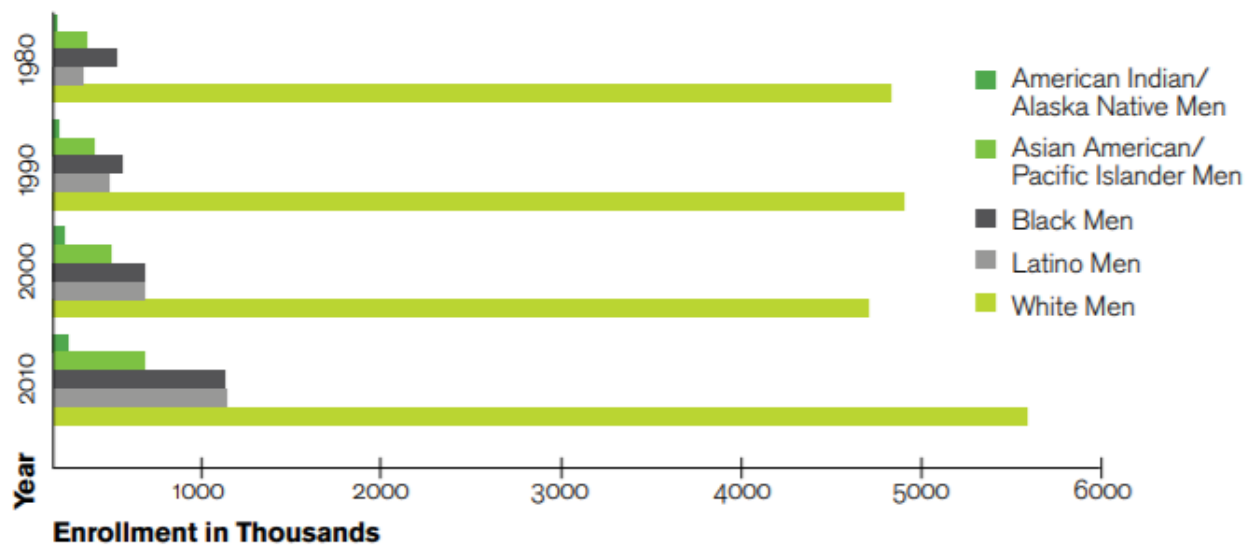
Note: Fall enrollment in degree-granting institutions.
Source: U.S. Department of Education. *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2011. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2010.

Note. From *Digest of Education Statistics*, by U.S. Department of Education, 2011, National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/2011menu_tables.asp. In the public domain.

Between 2000 and 2016, Black American male enrollment of 18–24-year-olds in college increased from 25% to 33% (de Brey et al., 2018). In 2018, 39% of 18–24 Black men were enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions (Digest of Education Statistics, 2019). Even though Black male enrollment increased, the completion rate of this subpopulation has not kept pace with that of other groups. In 2015–16, only 36% of Black men completed a Bachelor's degree, the lowest completion rate of any subpopulation by race or gender, with American Indian men at 39% and Hispanic men at 40% (de Brey et al., 2018). Identifying and acknowledging the factors, such as racial discrimination, according to the authentic narratives of Black male students who successfully navigate higher education is critical to adjusting the disparity.

Background

      Racial discrimination is still active in our American society. Racial discrimination is treating someone differently because of racial identity (Matthew, 2017). In American culture, how people are treated differently based on race has clear educational and economic implications (Small & Pager, 2020). Additionally, racial discrimination impacts college students' academic and psychosocial success, primarily due to the secondary effect of depressive symptoms (Dorvil et al., 2020; Lee, 2018). Discrimination-related risks for our youth are real and create a challenging situation for them as future leaders. Sladek et al. (2020) also found an increased risk of depression and low self-esteem in minority youth due to racial discrimination. The impact of race-related stress and anxiety directly correlates to how internalized racism is in students (Sosoo et al., 2020). Those who accept the aspects of negative racial stereotypes tend to carry more stress and anxiety with them (Sosoo et al., 2020). The marginalization of Black men in American society results in an uphill climb for them to attain equality of educational and economic status.

      In 2014, then-President Barack Obama launched the My Brother's Keeper program. In his speech, he addressed the current known factors prohibiting the nation's male minority students from achieving higher education. "That's what 'My Brother's Keeper' is all about; helping more of our young people stay on track and providing the support they need to think more broadly about their future. Building on what works – when it works, in those critical life-changing moments" (Obama, 2014). Upon launch, 48 states and over 200 cities, tribes, and counties participated. The initiative exhibits how presidential power can explore social issues. With the political power of a United States president behind the initiative, one would expect this program to be widely known and highly successful. The results reflect the United States' values and lack

of motivation to address this challenging problem of ensuring educational success for some of the country's most marginalized citizens.

According to Santiago and Ivery (2020), Black men in the United States frequently experience harassment and threats which negatively impact their ability to succeed. Viewing the oppression of Black citizens, especially that of Black men, in person, on television, and on social media creates an environment of fear and inhibits their ability to live authentically. Santiago and Ivery (2020) noted, "For 400 years, systemic racism (also known as institutionalized or structural racism) has been used in the United States primarily against African Americans as an institutionalized mechanism of social control, economic exploitation, and white supremacy" (p. 195). With the growing presence and influence of social media, these accounts of systematic racism frequently are captured and publicized. The harassment and acts of aggression against Black citizens, who are often merely living their daily lives, create anxiety and hostility (Cobbina, 2019). English et al. (2020) found that Black youth, on average, experience 5.21 incidences of racial discrimination either individually or vicariously per day. As a result, this racial tension impacts the hearts, minds, and perspectives of Black boys and men in America.

"Race in America is a majority culture social construct that stereotypes a minority group" (Frazier, 2010, p. 4). The macrosystem influencing our views of social justice and equality is in flux. Lichter (2013) stated, "predicts a 'third demographic shift' for the United States by 2043" (p. 361). This change will result in a majority–minority society where the children living in poverty, without access to high-quality education today, will become the country's leaders (Lichter, 2013). Therefore, the national demographic shift will have an impact on education. American society needs to accept this change and prepare tomorrow's leaders by providing them access to quality education. Students in the United States are feeling the tensions of the racial

divide. Scott et al. (2013) found that students need skilled and culturally competent teachers, ambitious standards, expectations with academic opportunities, mentorship, and family and community support. Teachers need training about microaggressions to identify subtle racism in the classroom (Pearce, 2019). Grace and Nelson (2019) noted that in the United States, there is a level of racism toward Black male students in schools from educators who have low expectations of their ability to succeed. As such, this appears to perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline. These challenges are increasingly prevalent for students of color, who are frequently suspended or expelled from school, leading them toward criminal behaviors (Smith, 2009). Once labeled as criminals or aggressive, their life path is different, and higher education becomes impossible (Pesta, 2018). Our society is unfairly labeling and negatively impacting the future outcomes of many Black young men with significant potential.

Demographic shifts within the workforce in the United States will continue to drive diversification, requiring an educated population (Alba & Yrizar Barbosa, 2016). American colleges publicize that diversity and inclusion are valued. College educators desire diversity on campus but appear unsure of the best practices to ensure Black males' graduation success (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012). They struggle with the best methods to successfully implement authentic diversity other than providing implicit bias training in hopes that faculty and staff will identify their unconscious prejudices and alter their behavior to be more welcoming to diverse students (Applebaum, 2019). Howarth and Andreouli (2016) concluded that approaches that engage diversity rather than manage diversity are more successful. How well colleges genuinely embrace authentic diversity may impact their successful education of students in the future and allow more focused conversations around building and engaging new approaches to learning more about diversity.

American higher education trends have shown Black men complete college at a rate of up to 20% lower than other subpopulations (de Brey et al., 2018.). Higher education aims to ensure that populations politically, educationally, medically, linguistically, and culturally thrive. However, the data demonstrate an inequality. The significant disparity of college completion for American Black males leads to disproportionate access to the American dream believing that all citizens have equal access to quality education. Scholars describe American society's racial inequality as approaching an all-time high (Carter, 2018). This study will aim to understand college undergraduate degree completion through the Black male students' lens to examine their lives holistically and provide valuable data to college faculty and administrators. The authentic and valued life stories may help administrators understand the societal influences that impact Black male perspectives and personal successes. Answering how some persist despite societal threats will be enlightening for those who work in higher education. Those with limited knowledge will provide an opportunity for dialogue for those with little knowledge on this important group's important role in the American higher education system.

Moreover, knowledge of the causes of low male minority retention in higher education may inform higher education leaders to implement curriculum and support services, positively impacting access to resources, education, and personal qualities needed to reinforce persistence. An increase in male minority higher education retention and graduation rates may equalize college degree accomplishment among all subgroups. When an equal percentage of male minority students achieve college degree attainment, the American professional workforce will, in turn, become more diverse and representative of the citizens of the United States. Examining the Black male student perspective may provide a roadmap to best practices supporting Black men on campus through their college experience to graduation. Higher education leaders may

consider developing a roadmap to college success for this group by focusing on the achievement factors from the lived experiences of Black male college graduates. Understanding what contributes to retention, resilience, and determination to complete a college education despite the odds may help educational institutions develop successful pathways for others that follow.

Statement of the Problem

American societal expectation is that through education, all citizens have the opportunity to achieve their goals. A national plan is in place to ensure a college education for most of the population, who will be work-ready, helping the United States reclaim global prominence (Nettles, 2017). American citizens assume they will have access to quality instruction, as educational attainment promises increased earning potential (Anumba, 2015). However, that promise of the American education dream is not equally accessible to all our young citizens.

Inequality in this promise is evident for Black male students who graduate college at a rate of 40%, significantly lower than White and Asian subpopulations (Shapiro et al., 2017). Black men struggle for social capital in America (Mishra, 2020), and their absence in higher education attainment is evidence of their battle (Scott et al., 2013). Despite the acknowledgment from colleges of this disparity, the Black male graduation rate remains a pervasive concern of the American education system (Harris, 2018; Hoffman et al., 2019; Lynch-Alexander, 2017). The disproportionate number of Black men obtaining a college degree creates an achievement gap in America's higher education-to-workforce diversity, limiting the Black male population's socioeconomic mobility (Adams et al., 2020). For most Black men, an undergraduate degree provides access to professional, higher-paying jobs (Smith et al., 2011). Therefore, once the Black male population's graduation rates align with other subpopulations, the American professional workforce has the potential to become increasingly diverse and representative of the

United States (Gaddis, 2015). The richness of increased diversity in the American professional workforce as a result of more Black men represented may impact their social capital.

Black men must exert exhaustive emotional energy to succeed in college, especially at predominately White colleges (Mills, 2019). According to Meyers et al. (2019), Black men experience hostility, antagonism, and a lack of support services in their respective colleges. Entering a foreign and intolerant college environment challenges their commitment to education (Patterson & Domenech Rodríguez, 2019). Racial battle fatigue and microaggressions are barriers to academic achievement (Smith et al., 2016) and contribute to continued disenfranchisement (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). These represent a few challenges Black men face when pursuing higher education in America.

Although the barriers to success for these students have been researched, there is less research about the success factors, intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors leading these young men to degree attainment. Information from those who have lived the journey will focus this research on the factors that led Black men to college completion. Identifying the achievement roadmap of Black men who have completed an undergraduate degree is crucial to supporting the success of Black men who follow (Scott & Sharp, 2019). As such, this study seeks to capture the authentic life stories of Black men who have persisted through college. Recognizing the strategies that led to their academic accomplishment is an advancement toward educational equity (Kim & Hargrove, 2013). This study explored Black male college graduates' narratives seeking to promote an understanding of the multifaceted cultural and organizational issues encountered in higher education. I aimed to share participants' voices, which are essential to fully understanding the critical factors that led to successful college completion for Black men.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative narrative research study aimed to explore the critical factors that led to successful college completion for Black men. Capturing their authentic voices may provide a narrative perspective, sharing suggestions with the educational community for improvements. Through narratives, I may understand the influence of external factors such as support services and environment and internal factors like encouragement, motivation experiences, and overall completion expectations to assist more Black male students as they attain a college degree. By focusing on success factors from Black male college graduates' authentic lived experiences, college faculty and administrators may implement a roadmap to best practices for college success for this group.

Research Question

The following served as guiding research question to provide the research framework for this study. This study explored the influence of various external factors, such as support services and environment, and internal factors, like encouragement, motivation experiences, and overall completion expectations, to help more Black male students achieve college graduation.

RQ1: How do Black men describe their authentic lived experiences to and through undergraduate college completion?

Definition of Key Terms

Authentic narrative. A lived experience from the student's perspective (O'Brien & Moules, 2007).

Black male students. Black male students are described as Black males, Black men, and African American undergraduates. American men of color from various origins who are attending college in the United States (NCES, 2018).

Degree completion. Degree completion and degree attainment are used interchangeably to refer to undergraduate degree completion (Tinto, 2012).

Extrinsic. Extrinsic is used interchangeably with external to refer to factors outside or around the student (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012).

Higher education. Higher education refers to education beyond high school or secondary education. In this research, higher education refers to students obtaining a 4-year bachelor's degree.

Intrinsic. Intrinsic is used interchangeably with internal to define factors within the student (Harper & Kuykendall, 2012).

Pre-college socialization and readiness. The familial factors, K-12 school forces, and out-of-school college prep resources contribute to one's education.

Retention. Tinto (1975) defined retention as student progression from the first year of college to the second, the second to the third, and the third to the fourth year. Retaining college enrollment leads to graduation and not departing from college prior to degree completion.

Summary

This chapter explored the history of Black men in higher education, the issues Black men face in college, and the conceptual framework on which this research is based. This exploration will aim to understand better Black male college graduates' narratives seeking to promote an appreciation and awareness of the multifaceted cultural and organizational issues encountered in higher education. The shared voices of Black male college graduates and the resilience measures that were impactful in understanding the critical factors that led to successful college completion for Black men were presented and foundational to this study.

Chapter 2 will review the literature and give a richer understanding of the identified intrinsic and extrinsic factors that impact Black male college completion. By revealing the roadmap to degree attainment for Black men through authentic narratives, positive perspectives of college completion can be shared with others for their journey and for college faculty and administrators to deepen their understanding of this population's unique challenges.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This qualitative narrative research study explored the critical factors that led to successful college completion for Black men. This purpose arose from the issue of Black male retention in college and overall low graduation rates across the nation. The literature review presents numerous external and internal issues shown to harm the students' ability to achieve academic success. The conceptual framework was grounded in exploring the shared authentic lived experiences of Black men who attended higher education institutions and completed their degrees. Most of the literature available focuses on the barriers to success for these students from a deficit-informed perspective. Few studies focus on the factors that lead to the successful accomplishment of Black male college students earning an undergraduate degree. That gap in literature emphasizes the narratives that were collected and presented in this study.

Literature Search Methods

For this review, research studies, articles, and books were found using the ACU library and dissertation database, EBSCO, OneSearch, and Google Scholar. Review and research articles dating from 2000 to 2022 were utilized, as well as studies considered seminal or highly influential related to this study. The following are some keywords used to find available information in peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, and books: *Black male*, *college completion*, *college retention*, *student success*, *persistence*, *narrative research*, *qualitative studies*, and *lived experiences of Black men.*

Conceptual Framework Discussion

The lens through which this study was examined focused on student success models through an association of concepts related to Black male higher education persistence to graduation. Traditional theories have silenced youths' authentic narratives in research (O'Brien &

Moules, 2007). Exploring a new landscape to capture Black men's journey to and through college despite the overwhelming odds against their success is significant. Learning about authentic lived experiences will provide valuable information on better supporting and advising Black men in undergraduate programs.

Harper's anti-deficit theory (2012) will assist with interpreting and analyzing the results of this study. Harper's (2012) anti-deficit theory became well-publicized in his report from the National Black Male College Achievement Study. Harper's framework developed from the largest-ever study of 219 Black men in undergraduate school. Instead of focusing on the problematic issues facing them in education, Harper emphasized their successes despite the odds against them. Dr. Benjamin Mays, sixth president of Morehouse College, said, "there was an air of expectancy on campus that every young man was capable of becoming exceptional as a leader, as a professional, as a human being" (Harper, 2012, p. 4). The attitude of expectation is a concept vital to success. Positive success messaging, mentoring, monitoring progress, compassionate ministering, and strategic funding investment promote Black male success (Franklin, as cited in Harper, 2012). Focusing on the Black male college student experience through this optimistic lens may provide insight into the factors that lead to college completion.

Harper's research and theory focus on understanding the success factors instead of the limitations of Black men in higher education (Harper, 2012). The anti-deficit framework offers researchers a positive outlook when considering Black men in education. This framework provides three categories: pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success (Harper, 2012). Each classification offers subcategories with suggested questions to probe potential elements related to intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Harper's (2012) "eight researchable dimensions of achievement include familial factors, K-12 education, out-of-school

college preparation, classroom experiences, enrichment experiences, out-of-classroom engagement, graduate school enrollment, and career readiness to focus on areas of Black male strengths within the framework" (p. 5). This framework of considering the positive impacts on Black males' educational success aligns with the study, seeking to identify the roadmap to college completion.

The anti-deficit theory has appeal to researchers, educators, and administrators because it reframes the perspective of Black men in education from shortfalls to accomplishments. This theory provides strategic actions by focusing on "three strategic pipeline points (pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success) as well as eight researchable dimensions of achievement (familial factors, K-12 school forces, out-of-school college prep resources, classroom experiences, out of class engagement, enriching education experiences, graduate school enrollment and career readiness)" to make a difference in the lives of Black men (Harper, 2012, p. 7). Understanding how overcoming barriers to access education gives rich insight to other Black male students and college faculty and administrators.

Resilience theory considers individuals in their environments (Ungar & Liebenberg, 2011). Resilience is defined as the capacity of a system for successful adaptation to disturbances that threaten system function, viability, or development (Masten, 2016). The resilience theory originated in studying how adversity impacts people (Van Breda, 2018). Van Breda (2018) posited that resilience is a process, and resilience is an outcome.

Tanaka (2003) proposed a new method of thinking about diversity on college campuses called interculturalism. His theory provides an alternative understanding compared to traditional Western civilization and multiculturalism. In Tanaka's (2003) theory, people of all backgrounds blend to accept each other's differences and form interdependent relationships needed to succeed

in a diverse global society. College campuses embracing worldwide diversity on their campuses might serve as a more hospitable environment for people to thrive. This thinking can prove beneficial within domestic diversity as well.

Stroh (2015) proposed that systems thinking involves valuing that the situation one may want to change is complicated and likely caused by indirect forces. Humans create issues and have more control than one may realize to change them through different behavior (Stroh, 2015). Real change takes time and understanding the parts that make up the whole (Stroh, 2015). Considering the motivation for improving Black male college student retention and graduation is foundational to implementing any changes.

Initially, Tinto's (1975) retention theory focused on integrating students into college culture and observing their reasons for dropping out. Subsequent studies led Tinto (2012) to include external factors such as financial resources and the students' world beyond higher education, as well as internal factors such as the sense of inclusion on campus and quality education in the classroom. Tinto's research on student departure from college laid a firm foundation for understanding why Black male students leave college before completion. Tinto's theory states that students need clear goals, such as the perception that they can succeed and have control, a sense of belonging, and perceived curriculum relevance. When integrated into the Black male college experience, these factors may influence retention and perseverance.

Literature Review

Black male college students' 6-year completion rate at 4-year colleges was 40% in 2016 for the 2010 cohort, which was 20% lower than White and Asian subpopulations (Shapiro et al., 2017). The 2012 cohort's 6-year graduation rate for Black men was even lower, having the lowest completion rate of all subpopulations at 36.1% (Shapiro et al., 2017). Black males' issue

of completing undergraduate degrees is widely recognized and studied (Burton, 2016; Eakins &

Eakins, 2017). Despite the focus, it remains a pervasive concern of the American education

system (Harris, 2018; Hoffman et al., 2019; Lynch-Alexander, 2017).

Pre-College Socialization and Readiness and College Achievement

External Factors

According to Harris et al. (2014), to succeed in higher education, students must

understand the structure of the environment and have a firm foundation in the core subjects such

as math, reading, and science, and possess analytic strategies and academic behaviors. The best

teaching methods, curriculum, and technology are often unavailable to Black male students due

to their socio economic status, school location, and teachers' quality (St. Mary et al., 2018). Lack

of resources leads to unpreparedness for the academic rigor expected in study skills, learning

skills, and analytical ability (Harris et al., 2014). Elementary and secondary educational

marginalization negatively impact one's ability to succeed in higher education (Gaylord-Harden

et al., 2018). In 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA)

giving school principals the ability to improve the academic practices and teacher capabilities to

provide more equitable education to marginalized students (Miller & Martin, 2015). Teacher

ability and cultural understanding are critical to minority student success (Hayes et al., 2013;

Milner, 2016). According to a study by the Pew Research Center (Schaeffer, 2021), America's

teachers are far less diverse than their students. According to Schaeffer (2021), "In schools

where at least 90% of students were minorities, the share of teachers who were Hispanic was

28%, while 20% of teachers were Black, 5% were Asian, and 43% were White." The possibility

of a Black male being taught by numerous White, female teachers is very high in America.

While there is nothing wrong with a White teacher teaching Black children, it is a great

responsibility to influence the lives of these children significantly. Having the power to do something to create opportunities for Black students to achieve requires gaining a cultural understanding to the point of creating a culturally relevant framework with which to teach for achieving success and building relationships with Black students (Harris et al., 2014).

Belonging in general is a human emotional need to be part of a group and to be accepted and feel included. Academic belonging is important as it is not only feeling accepted in the larger community, but also feeling that you are accepted academically which includes feeling competent to do the work in the classroom (Nunn, 2021). Tinto (2017) described student belonging as when the student perceives the value of their participation in the learning community. This feeling of belonging can serve to bind the student to the community so that when challenges arise the student persists because they feel valued as part of the group; and this leads to their persistence (Strayhorn, 2008; Tinto, 1997). One way to achieve this sense of belonging is through using a participatory approach where staff consider student's needs in all aspects policy to ensure the full range of student experiences is meeting their needs to engage them (Smith et al., 2021). Kahu et al. (2022) found that academic belonging, relating to student's courses and program of study being a good fit for them, tended to vary, while interpersonal belonging seemed to grow as time went on. This study indicates that belonging in college may have more subtleties and complexities than previously thought. As Pickford (2016) noted, at institutions the staff must recognize that students are not homogenous and it is necessary to appreciate different students' perspectives, reasons for coming to college and the different ways they engage.

Hawkins-Jones and Reeves (2020) found that culturally relevant material is missing from many classrooms, and this absence negatively impacts the academic interest and success of

minority students. Culturally empowering courses have been found to foster academic and personal success among Black college students and contribute to retention and graduation rates (Chapman-Hilliard et al., 2016). Harper (2012) observed that Black students at predominately White colleges often experience a climate that is "toxic" and exclusionary (p. 188). Harper (2012) also found that White students can often be unaware of their institutions commitement to diversity, thus can create an unwelcoming environment for minority students. Counterspace, where individuals from marginalized groups engage in collective disruption of the dominant narrative of the larger institution, has been found to provide agency to Black male students. These spaces allow them to acknowledge their identities, navigate diverse racial environments, learn the college educational process, and provide a psychologically safe and supportive space within a larger context (Brooms et al., 2021; Chapman-Hilliard et al., 2016).

Peer discrimination at school may also lead to lower academic quality and persistence for students of color (Gale, 2020). Teacher trust impacts the academic performance of Black men more significantly than Black females (McClain & Cokley, 2017). This trust disparity may be due to the myriad of unique challenges of prejudice, stereotypes, and unequal treatment they face, which heightens the trust factor as an academic motivator. Moreover, teacher expectations may positively or negatively impact Black male classroom success (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). The importance of quality, culturally competent, approachable, and encouraging teachers early in students' lives are critical to their long-term academic success (Harper, 2016). Teachers believing in students' abilities and encouraging them can be as crucial to student success as the content of the material used in the classroom. Parental expectations of commitment to education, coupled with high expectations for academic excellence, the value of higher education has been shown to positively impact the development of college aspirations (Cochran-Jackson, 2022).

Strong Black families that value education and hold high expectations for academic achievement provide a network of support to students that lead to academic success even to graduate degree achievement (McCallum, 2020). The faculty relationships of caring, keeping it real, high expectations, and identity connections, much like the parental or "other mothering" type relationships, have been shown to positively influence Black students, especially at predominately White institutions (McCallum, 2020).

Racial Discrimination

Several chronic stressors can negatively impact academic success, such as racial discrimination, violence in neighborhoods, police brutality, socioeconomic status, financial instability, absent parenting, and lack of social support networks (Patton et al., 2016; Range et al., 2018). Racial socialization, which includes communication regarding the meaning of race, instilling cultural pride and preparing for bias, and a strong peer network, can help students overcome their stressful environments (Brooms, 2019a). Finding other Black friends as a support network on campus can provide a strong association of support, especially on predominately White college campuses (Gilkes Borr, 2019). Equity-focused school-family-community-based partnerships can provide strong networks of support, resources, and opportunities that can contribute overcoming racial discrimination in educational systems and lead to positive academic outcomes (Griffin et al., 2021).

Each day, African American youth experience discrimination, resulting in depression (English et al., 2020; Hope et al., 2020). Historically, mental health issues within the Black community have been viewed as a stigma and not applied to them. This denial only further expands the depression and anxiety that results from the many issues they face daily within American society and the issue of not being able to seek support for psychological well-being

(Isimeme, 2021). Racial socialization of young black men prepares them for entering school and the challenges they might face (Cheeks et al., 2020; Metzger et al., 2020) and assists them with racial identity formation (Butler-Barnes et al., 2019). Caregiver practices such as active parenting, monitoring performance, conversations about school, consistency, protection from drugs and crime, and involvement at school have been shown to have a positive impact on African American youth development and academic achievement (Francis et al., 2021; Previ et al., 2020; Varner et al., 2018).

Mentoring

Role models and mentoring have been studied and implemented to test their success (Johnson et al., 2015, 2020). During the first year of college, mentors can help connect students to academic and mental health resources (Hurd et al., 2016). The idea of vertical teaming (Harris et al., 2014) uses family, school, and community partnerships to facilitate smooth transitions throughout a student's educational career. Many natural mentors can develop with coaches, teachers, or community leaders (Brown, 2012; Hurd et al., 2016; Ross, 2014). Even when male minority students have an assigned mentor during their first year of college, they may not connect in a meaningful way that positively impacts them. Mentoring with an authentic caring spirit is necessary for success (Jackson et al., 2014). A student's microsystem consists of those closest to them, like family and teachers (Harris et al., 2014). This microsystem has the most influence on students, their choices, and their successes. Therefore, having African American mentors in the college setting for Black male students is a critical choice that college administrators at predominately White institutions should consider (Sinanan, 2016).

Throughout a student's life, Black male role models can impact their self-efficacy, aspirations, and expectations for who they may become (Brooms, 2018, 2019b; Scott et al.,

2013). The educational aspirations of Black men are impacted by their social and family support and approval, as well as their community's cultural abundance (Brooms, 2017; Druery & Brooms, 2019). Mishra (2020) found that family, religious, and peer social networks can influence academic success. Spalter-Roth et al. (2013) compared racially homogenous mentoring relationships with White advisors to Black graduate students and found that both types of relationships are advantageous. The equivalent race mentoring relationship provided emotional and cultural support, while the White male to Black student relationship offered scholarly cultural information and access to needed networking (Spalter-Roth et al., 2013). Encouraging environments at school with supportive cultures can positively shape Black males' educational experience (Brooms, 2019b). Peer support groups such as fraternities have also correlated positively with Black male academic success (Miller & Bryan, 2020).

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are verbal and nonverbal actions against people of color meant to humiliate or humble (Meyers et al., 2019). Black men experience microaggressions in school settings, and these encounters can impact their academic success (Smith et al., 2011; Von Robertson & Chaney, 2017) and their mental health (Patterson & Domenech Rodríguez, 2019). An unjust environment can impede the intellectual identity development of students (McCoy, 2018). Environmental racism at PWI has been found to include "segregation, lack of representation, campus response to criminality, cultural bias in courses, tokenism, and pressure to conform" (Mills, 2019, p. 1). Racism is considered to occur on a macrolevel by impacting all persons of color interacting in the environment (Mills, 2019). Black men entering predominately White colleges arrive with assumptions about them before meeting anyone (Von Robertson & Chaney, 2017). Meyers et al. (2019) found that microaggressions in racially diverse

environments were less than in homogenous contexts, concluding that racial minorities might benefit from being in racially diverse surroundings.

Intrinsic Factors

Resilience - Grit

Resilience is an intrinsic factor that can be a positive asset for many youths. Resilience is the ability to recover from or adjust easily to change or hardship. Students of color that display resiliency can draw on their cultural identity to keep moving forward when facing challenges (Butler-Barnes et al., 2013). Turner (2020) found that Black men in a predominately White institution could thrive by drawing on their cultural identity, applying their persistent background, and collaborating to obtain the support needed. How American society views and labels Black men impacts their success and resiliency with labels such as criminal, aggressive, and against education, forcing them to work harder to overcome the preconceived ideas regarding who they are authentically (Alexander, 2016). Czopp et al.'s (2015) study revealed that positive stereotypes, or approving opinions, about a social group can impact "systemic changes within society related to power and privilege" (p. 451). Grit, effort, and determination are more critical to success than talent (Duckworth, 2016). The decision to push through and show up consistently, regardless of the barriers, can bring students through many difficult situations to achieve their goals and strengthen resilience.

Persistence

Persistence is the continuance of a course of action despite the difficulty or opposition. The increase in public shootings of Black men has led to the trauma of this group losing their basic sense of safety and security in society (Range et al., 2018). Yet, they persist. Neighborhood community groups and teachers can offer a place of refuge, healing, and hope to youth

supporting their resiliency to continue their education (Ginwright, 2015). In the Schott Report (2015), Black males' educational inequity was well documented, citing the opportunity gap that can be changed by providing healthy living and learning environments for them as youth. Healthy environments contribute to persistence (Brooms et al., 2021) research demonstrated that male success initiatives could inspire Black men's persistence and improve their resilience, especially using counterspaces.

Motivation

A personal expectation to succeed and motivation to press on can be the strongest predictor of academic success (Goings & Shi, 2018). It is a reflective process for a Black male to view himself as intellectual and an environment that encourages and expects academic success is a strong contributor (Adams et al., 2020). Verbal motivation and encouragement from family and friends can provide pivotal inspiration (Anumba, 2015). Grit, the passionate pursuit of long-term goals, not intelligence or talent, enables students to commit to seeing things through (Duckworth, 2016). This determination and commitment support Black males' perseverance at a predominately White institution and has been shown to add to the predictive validity of academic success (Strayhorn, 2014). Black male voices are critical to understanding the success factors in navigating educational inequity. Understanding what motivated them to value, guide, and persist through higher education to completion contributes to the existing literature (Alexander, 2016) and provides additional insight into Black male graduation's complicated cultural and organizational issues in higher education

Cultural Confidence

Cultural confidence has contributed to self-confidence in students of color (Henfield, 2012; Turner, 2020). Self-defeating thoughts significantly inhibit academic success, as much as

financial liabilities, racism, and discrimination (Harris, 2018). Overcoming a negative perception

of abilities can be countered with a solid connection to a community of origin supporting a

robust cultural emphasis (Turner, 2020). In 1903, DuBois developed the term "double

consciousness" in his work" The Souls of Black Folk," which posits those with dark skin living

in a White-skinned world are forced to look at themselves not only through their lens but also

through the perspective of those they are living among (Wright, 2018). Black men attending

predominately White institutions are compelled to live with a double consciousness measuring

their success against their White peers while wanting to prove themselves worthy of the same

opportunities (Wright, 2018). Students of color who have been raised in an environment that

considers education an investment in their future seem to have an easier time being academically

successful, realizing the sacrifices as an asset to their future (Strayhorn, 2014). Likewise,

students of color who have participated in religious activities during their childhood tend to have

higher grades, more positive feelings about education, and higher self-confidence (Toldson &

Anderson, 2010). Students that can engage in cultural or historical experiences with other Black

male students gain a significant perspective that can support persistence (Brooms & Goodman,

2019).

Respect for differences and an understanding that culture is entangled in all programs are

vital for individuals working closely with Black men in higher education to recognize (Greene et

al., 2015). As Wilkinson (2011) suggested in his example of leadership, qualities such as

transparency, authenticity, and building a team with a shared vision are critical to creating a

secure culture for members to feel comfortable assessing their needs. Establishing a healthy

organizational culture can assist with the effectiveness of a needs assessment, which can be

costly, take valuable time and emotional investment, stress capacity, and cause confusion

between the dominant group's intentions versus the vulnerable group within the organization (Chen, 2015).

Values

Successfully incorporating stakeholders' values can impact any intervention's success (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). The determinant, or cause of the problem, is identified with the stakeholders' input and understanding of the problem (Chen, 2015). Assessments can provide critical feedback to connect an organization's current outcomes and aspire to achieve and meet stakeholders' needs (Chen, 2015). Regarding this study, there are several stakeholders, including black male students, the faculty, staff, and college administrators are all stakeholders.

Additionally, Black male alums of the college may also be interested stakeholders. Gathering stakeholders' views through an assessment tool and analyzing the direction can reveal needs through positive discrepancies and opportunities through negative differences (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). Inputs are resources dedicated to the program and can include ideas (Chen, 2015).

Kaufman and Guerra-Lopez (2013) developed five organizational elements to define and relate to improving society's output and value. These include the mega value, the macro value, the micro value, inputs, and processes. The mega adds value to society just as improving black male college students' socioeconomic status would add significant value to the community through their contributions. The macro value benefits the organization. In this case, the achievement of college graduation for more Black men improves the college's overall success rate, precisely their graduation rate for a minority subpopulation. This success metric will appeal to many donors, which may improve access to funding and attract more students in all racial groups. The microlevel relates to the products produced or individual results (Kaufman &

Guerra-Lopez, 2013), providing academic support, mentors, and programs to assist student success. Inputs and processes involve training, learning, managing, and funding Black men in higher education (Kaufman & Guerra-Lopez, 2013). Providing adequate funding for needed programs, cross-cultural training, and micro-aggression understanding are examples of inputs and processes that would benefit this group.

Summary

A literature review provided evidence that Black male college completion is a subject worthy of continued investigation. Educational disadvantages, limited access to technological resources, lack of cultural understanding and appreciation, and the extent of community support have been shown in studies to impact higher education success. Personal motivation, grit and determination, self-confidence, and cultural confidence also appear in studies as influencing higher education completion. Harper's (2012) anti-deficit achievement theory presents and guides this study, focusing on the significance of the Black male achievement. Despite the multitude of internal and external barriers, many Black men do attain their goal of achieving an undergraduate degree. Their pathway to success is the focus of this study.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed discussion of the study's research design, including the method, population, sample, materials, and instruments used to gather and analyze data. The research design channels the collection of the authentic lived experiences of Black male college students and determines the effective use of their experiences collected into dynamic narratives. These narratives will aim to emphasize the participants' voices and share their stories of educational success.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This qualitative narrative research study aimed to explore the critical factors that led to successful college completion for Black men. Understanding from an authentic perspective may provide suggestions to the educational community for improvements that will address the support services, environment, encouragement, and expectations to help more Black male students graduate from college. By focusing on success factors from Black male college graduates' lived experiences, sharing a roadmap to college success for this group with others to encourage increased degree attainment for this population.

The lens for this study was Harper's (2012) anti-deficit theory, which highlights students' successes rather than problematic issues. A positive outlook of Black male education may emerge by capturing the students' success factors rather than limitations. Harper's (2012) framework offers three categories to view their journey: pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success. These three categories framed the inquiry to gain information on the intrinsic and extrinsic contributing factors toward success. The participants perceived experiences within these categories created a story of their authentic experiences through narrative inquiry.

Chapter 3 describes the design and methodology chosen for this study. Additionally, it identifies the population, setting, sample, the researcher's role, materials, instruments, data collection methods, and analysis of that data. Finally, all aspects of design were addressed by highlighting trustworthiness, reliability, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and ethical considerations.

Research Question

The research question was designed to allow students to share their perspectives of their authentic educational experience, minimizing researcher bias on expectations. An open-ended question allows for a semistructured interview with follow up or clarifying questions deemed appropriate. The research question was, How do Black men describe their authentic lived experiences to and through undergraduate college completion?

Researcher Role

The interpretive design considers how people interact and make sense of their daily lives through social interactions (Leavy, 2017). "All research is interpretive," indicating that each researcher brings experiences and assumptions to the study (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017, p. 142). The researcher must acknowledge connections and desire to explore this topic. As a lifelong educational administrator, I have witnessed many Black male students arrive on campus optimistic and ready to seize their future, only to watch them leave before reaching their college educational goals. I have been fortunate to develop mentoring relationships and friendships with many of these impressive young men. Far too many time, my heart has broken as I watch them struggle to accomplish what would seem to be right within their reach. Many have achieved their goal. What complicated and intricate factors make the difference has been a question I have long pondered. The opportunity to conduct this research to obtain the rich narrative of Black men that have graduated college and gain their insights into their successful completion of an undergraduate degree may benefit future Black men and those who invest in their successful futures.

Positionality is the researcher's cultural aspects, such as race or gender, and is the practice of defining their position about the study, with the implication that this position may

influence elements of the research (Creswell, 2008). In this qualitative, narrative research, it was necessary to disclose positionality to understand the process accurately and honestly. I am a 59-year-old, White female with a 35-plus-year career in higher education, specifically student services. I am originally from the southeast but have also lived and worked in the midwest. Though I admit my upbringing influenced my culture, I also feel I have developed a deep sense of cultural curiosity and understanding over the years through friendships and working with diverse student populations. Many years ago, my desire for educational access and equality was awakened through witnessing inequality, and I have spent my career working toward action to see it as a reality.

Pivotal to this work was the opportunity that came to me quite organically in about 2008. The football coach sent a Black male student-athlete to see me because he was not making satisfactory academic progress. The college did not have a formal academic support center, so he and I made a plan for his accountability and success. A professional relationship and genuine friendship grew, as did his academic success. Over the coming months and years, he brought friends, who brought friends, and so on, until we decided to create a male minority leadership group. This group of young men taught me more than I ever dreamed of giving to them. They further opened my eyes and mind to what they faced, what they overcame, and how given a fair chance at success, they too could succeed. I continue to admire the educational journey of Black men in America. Thus, choosing to use the narrative approach for this research to let their voices and their lived experiences flow through to you. Their words tell their stories.

Qualitative Research Approach

Establishing a psychologically safe, respectful, and trusting environment for the participants as they share their educational journey (Emery & Anderman, 2020). Terrell (2015)

stated a researcher should "develop a research environment that is trusting, balanced, and ethical, respecting the opinions and participation of all" (p. 69). The semistructured interview allowed participants to read and hear the main question and choose what they felt were essential factors in their journey to share. The trusting relationship is critical to ensuring the authenticity of shared stories and understanding that multiple perspectives and subjective truths might be revealed (Terrell, 2015). Establishing a trusting and safe environment in our initial interaction is critical to ensuring the participants are comfortable sharing their authentic lived experiences.

An authentic narrative research approach allowed this study to capture the stories of selected Black men and their pathways to higher education completion in the southeast United States. Their experiences hold great value in understanding that multiple realities exist in society. As a researcher, it is my role to listen, observe and report the paradigms of their historical narratives. Qualitative inquiry is a way to gain and emphasize the participants' experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Narrative creation is a participatory process between the researcher and participants (Riessman, 2008). Using the qualitative narrative approach, "the study and description of lived experiences, the essences, and essentials of experiential states, nature of being and personally significant meanings of phenomena," the authentic lived experiences of Black male students who have faced college. They persevered through graduation and will be discovered (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017, p. 417). The narrative theory will allow this researcher to collect and report the Black male college graduates' perceptions of their social realities and how they experience the world (Leavy, 2017). Qualitative narrative research is often "emergent, nonlinear, and messy" (Bruce et al., 2016, p. 1). The narrative approach offers the flexibility to inquire with participants and capture meaningful information as participants share their journey stories.

Population

Purposeful sampling with common factors provided insight into achieving higher education. Purposeful sampling involves selecting a representative group based on specific aspects (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The focus is on selection criteria when using purposeful sampling to confirm the richness of the qualitative study (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). Purposeful sampling occurred utilizing LinkedIn to recruit Black male participants who were graduates of predominately White higher education institutions in the southeast United States.

Study Sample

The sample was selected from an alum pool of Black male graduates from private, predominately White colleges in the southeast United States primarily via LinkedIn. The pool was recruited using social media, posting the invitation on LinkedIn and Facebook. Snowball recruiting was encouraged in the posting. Qualitative studies often have small participant sample sizes due to the complex issues being probed (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The sample was non-random, purposefully selected to provide strategic access to participants who can provide a depth of rich information (Leavy, 2017). The purposeful sampling was Black male college graduates, as they met the specific criteria of the focus of the study. Protocols and procedures were approved by the Abilene Christian College Institutional Review Board (IRB). I then sought to recruit participants for the survey targeting Black male graduates from private, religious-affiliated PWIs in the southeast United States. Participants were recruited through social media via my personal Facebook page, LinkedIn, and snowballing. Participants expressing an interest were contacted via emails (Appendix A) they shared or through direct messaging options in social media to gauge their interest in being involved in the study.

The number of graduate participants resulted from their self-selection for participation. Twelve men expressed interest, nine completed the consent form, and eight followed through with interviews. Once their interest was confirmed, each participant was sent a demographic data form (Appendix B). This form collected their gender, race, age, hometown and state, the college they graduated from, year of graduation, degree obtained, continued college beyond undergraduate, and if they lived on or off campus during their undergraduate years. An informed consent form (Appendix C) was sent via Hello Sign to each prospective participant to ensure their voluntary participation, minimal risk related to participation in the study, and confidentiality. It was retained with other collected data.

Materials/Instruments

The interviews provided the opportunity to capture the authentic stories of the participants' lived experiences. As the interviewer, this researcher served as the primary data collection instrument while recording the video interactions. Data collection occurred through virtual audio and video sessions with each participant allowing them to share their authentic journey to and through higher education richly. Virtual interviews were used because of the current global COVID-19 pandemic to avoid the risk of fear from participants and to eliminate geographic barriers to participation. The Zoom platform of audio and video sessions allowed for secure interactions to occur, providing for verbal and nonverbal data collection. Interview protocol was reviewed with each participant (Appendix D). The first question was general and open-ended, granting the participants a free license to share what has been essential to their achievement. Follow-up questions allowed for flexibility in exploring individual success factors (Appendix E). Allotting time for participants to share their stories contributed to the richness of authentic narratives.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Using a semistructured data collection technique created a relationship of trust with the researcher to fully share their authentic narratives and incorporate multiple layers of reflection through the process (Englander, 2020). The researcher's responsibility is to constantly check their opinions and prejudices as the primary purpose is to add knowledge to a complex situation (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The semistructured interview approach allowed me to obtain authentic, lived experiences through personal interaction and the knowledge gained through the process. The participants were first to be presented with an open-ended general question. This broad beginning allowed them the freedom to interpret, reflect and give their perspective.

Here are some of the research and interview questions that were used in collecting data for this study:

- What do you perceive contributed to your transition to and through undergraduate college completion at American colleges? Additional questions will be asked as a follow-up to deepen the inquiry.

- How do you see your role as an American Black male navigating the American higher education system?

- What contributed to your persistence in a successful educational journey from K-16?

- What external and internal factors prepared you for your college experience?

- What external and internal factors assisted you during your college experience?

- What external and internal factors influenced your continued success after college?

- What identities and labels did you collect along your K-16 journey, and what labels do you currently use as part of your identity?

Many traditional concepts have muffled the voices of youth (O'Brien & Moules, 2007). It was paramount to capture their genuine accounts and convey their truth through open sharing. The validity of data in a qualitative study is how accurately the narrative represents the authentic experience of the participants (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Member checking occurred by providing a reflective experience during the interveiw process for the participants (Candela, 2019). The Zoom transcription program was used to create data transcripts. The transcripts of the interviews were given to the participants to review, check for accuracy, and ensure that the authenticity of their story was captured (Birt et al., 2016).

Data collection occurred through open-ended questions during virtual interviews to allow for more in-depth and open conversations regarding their experiences. The use of remote electronic communications via the video communication tool, Zoom, allowed participants from multiple locations to participate at their convenience. In addition to recording the electronic interviews, field notes assisted with documenting contextual information. This combination approach to recording data is "a way to increase the effectiveness, efficiency, and economy of qualitative data management" (Tessier, 2012).

Interviewing is a "careful questioning and listening approach" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In this narrative study, the questions guided the participants through their educational history and allowed them the flexibility to discuss unanticipated topics (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The interview questions were developed based on Harper's (2012) anti-deficit theory list of eight areas of focus and allowed me to utilize questions highlighting the positive aspects of Black male educational achievement. The narratives built from "insight gathered from those who somehow manage to navigate their way through higher education despite all that is stacked against them" served as examples of success (Harper, 2012, p. 1). Harper's framework poses

questions from the positive perspective, striving to understand what motivated them to engage

both in and out of the classroom rather than focusing on why they did not engage. Follow-up or

clarifying questions were asked as appropriate. Questions such as:

- How were college aspirations cultivated in your life?

- How did you persist and earn your degree despite the opposing forces against you?

- What resources were effective in helping you to achieve?

The follow-up questions focused the participants on the specific success factors that led to their

academic achievement.

The interviews were reviewed to analyze and extract meaningful data. The audio/video

interviews were transcribed using the Zoom transcription function. I listened to the recorded

sessions while reading the transcriptions several times to ensure accuracy. The iterative process

of reviewing the material created a richer, thicker view of the data (Terrell, 2015). Once

transcribed and verified for accuracy, the participants had the opportunity to review the

transcriptions for accuracy. Notes were taken on identified events, experiences, sequencing, and

interactions of stories. The data were analyzed to determine primary themes and narratives

describing, explaining, and interpreting individual experiences (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017).

Qualitative coding was performed by identifying excerpts of text or keywords to organize

and develop patterns (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Based on Harper's (2012) anti-deficit

theory, theoretical thematic analysis was used to take coding cues from the data, not having

preconceived ideas, and allowing theory to emerge. This type of thematic analysis provided an

accurate picture of the authentic stories.. The manual coding process of reading, coding,

rereading, and recoding was an iterative process that allowed me to become very familiar with

the data. The identified themes were based on Harper's (2012) anti-deficit theory, which has

three main categories: pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success. This study used themes from the first two categories of pre-college socialization and readiness and college achievement (Appendix F).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical assertions to protect the rights of the participants followed the 1976 Belmont Report's basic principles to include respect for persons, beneficence or ensuring their best interests were served and just. The participants were given a consent form stating their rights before and during the interview. Though sharing authentic lived experiences is generally considered to have no risk associated with participation, the participants were assured that if they felt uncomfortable or did not want to continue discussing a particular topic, their request would be honored (Clandinin, 2013).

Keeping with standard protocol, this researcher secured approval from the Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board (IRB) before the recruitment of participants and data collection. This approval ensured the legal and ethical aspects of research with human subjects were in place. The participants provided oral histories of their lived experiences, so no risks associated with participation were expected. The confidentiality of participants was ensured by using pseudonyms in the final report to protect their identities. Presenting to participants that sharing poses no more risk than daily living and encouraging honesty was an essential ethical consideration and critical to data integrity (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). Participants were informed of these measures and the interview process and asked to sign an informed consent form indicating their willingness to participate in the study.

The human factor of error is present in every study. A focus on human reliability assessment occurred, taking into account what errors might occur and how likely they were to

happen and reducing the likelihood of human error as much as possible (Kirwan, 1994). Risk

assessment of the participants was ongoing, staying alert to verbal and nonverbal cues of

discomfort or duress in discussing topics. Participants were notified upfront and reminded

throughout the interview that they were free to stop the process at any point. Issues related to the

study, such as privacy, emotions associated with the topic of discussion, and the right to

terminate the session at any time, were discussed before the participants agreed to join the study

(Terrell, 2015). The wording of the questions was critical to avoid leading the participants to

give responses expected by this researcher. The dependability of data collection to ensure

consistency in relaying the narrative of participant responses was essential to confirm the validity

of their authentic stories (Terrell, 2015).

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Trustworthiness is important at every survey step and strengthens the study's value. Loh

(2013) suggested "issues of trustworthiness, narrative truth, verisimilitude, and utility need to be

attended to for any narrative study to ensure its quality" (p. 1). Findings that are trustworthy and

credible in this study honored the participants' stories when sharing their lived experiences of

being a Black male and pursuing higher education in the United States. Trustworthiness is

established when the participants' lived experiences are acknowledged and accepted as

authentically their own (Patton, 2014).

Methods such as persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking are some

techniques used within qualitative research to establish the credibility of a study (Guba &

Lincoln, 1989). Throughout this study, I observed the words, stories, and nonverbal cues as

participants shared their journeys. This study can facilitate transferability by providing a thick

description or giving extensive, detailed descriptions, through copious amounts of information to

present each authentic narrative (Amankwaa, 2016). Transferability offers evidence that the research findings may apply to or can be shared with other groups in higher education. Thick information in this narrative study includes specific details such as location settings, atmosphere, climate, participants present, attitudes and feelings of participants and others involved, and reactions observed not captured in words, and bonds established between participants and researcher.

Triangulation is a process used by qualitative researchers to ensure "an account is rich, robust, comprehensive, and well-developed" (Amankwaa, 2016). I performed triangulation in this study to compare the authentic experiences shared by participants. Since this was a narrative study of authentic, lived experiences, it was reasonable that there were variations in stories. However, the data were checked based on their experience within the same higher education institution. Triangulation by multiple analysts is a method where data review is conducted by other sources (Patton, 1999).

In this study, the participants were the analyst to review the narratives created to check on selective perceptions and highlight any blind spots to ensure the data presented were accurately depicted. Patton (1999) suggested that much can be learned by researchers "about the accuracy, fairness, and validity of their data analysis by having the people described in that data analysis react to what is described" (p. 1196). This type of participatory triangulation is like member checking, or having the participants review my transcriptions, so I could capture the authentic stories of the participants.

Assumptions

There was an assumption that similar themes would emerge through the narratives of the Black male participants that shared a similar college experience. The success factors that

appeared as influential and the barriers they had to overcome were anticipated to have similarities. Another assumption was that the participants could accurately reflect on their academic journey and connect with this researcher to produce rich narratives reflective of their authentic journeys.

Limitations

A purposeful sampling of students who self-selected using LinkedIn participation resulted in a small sample population of eight participants. The small sample size limitation may inhibit the generalizability of the study to all Black male undergraduate students at other types of colleges. Drawing the sample population from a small, private PWI in the southeast United States could limit the results from applying to different college environments. Four of the eight participants were not first-generation college students; thus, education was valued at home, and a general understanding of how to traverse the educational system was present, giving them a slight advantage of success.

Summary

A qualitative, narrative study of Black men who graduated with an undergraduate degree from a small, private, predominately White college in the southeast United States was conducted to capture their authentic experiences. The themes that arose from this study may create stories of success, viewing the journey of Black men in higher education in America from the positive lens of accomplishment. The intrinsic and extrinsic factors captured in their narratives tell stories of their attainment of undergraduate degrees, inspiring other students and informing college administrators.

Chapter 3 has outlined the research design and methodology applied in this study. It has provided the purpose of utilizing the qualitative narrative approach and explained the anti-deficit

lens through which the data were analyzed. The population selection, data collection approach,

and analysis procedures from the interview of the participants were detailed. Other

considerations included the researcher's role, ethical considerations, assumptions, limitations,

and delimitations.

Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative narrative research study aims to explore the critical factors that led to successful college completion for Black men. Understanding from an authentic perspective may provide suggestions to the educational community for improvements that will address the support services, environment, encouragement, and expectations to help more Black male students graduate from college. By focusing on success factors from Black male college graduates' lived experiences, a roadmap to college success for this group may be shared with others to encourage increased degree attainment for this population.

The lens for this study drew from Harper's (2012) anti-deficit theory, which highlights students' successes rather than problematic issues. A positive outlook of Black male education may emerge by capturing the students' success factors rather than limitations. Harper's (2012) framework offers three categories to view their journey: pre-college socialization and readiness, college achievement, and post-college success. These categories framed the inquiry to gain information on the intrinsic and extrinsic contributing factors toward success. The participants perceived experiences within these categories will create a story of their authentic experiences through narrative inquiry. The first two categories, pre-college socialization, and readiness and college achievement, are the focus of this study. A qualitative study using one-on-one interviews via Zoom captured their perceived internal and external experiences up to and through college and how they impacted their academic success in achieving undergraduate degree attainment. Chapter 4 presents the research data, analysis results, and the occurring categories and themes within Harper's pre-college socialization and readiness and college achievement classifications.

Participants' Demographic Characteristics

The demographics of the eight study participants are arranged in alphabetical order.

AJ came from a single-mom family in urban Florida. His father left them, took his college savings, and told him he would never amount to anything. AJ was determined to prove his father wrong. He was not prepared for college and was ADHD diagnosed in fifth grade. He is not a first-generation college student. His mom got a new job and a loan at the last minute to enable him to attend college. He went directly to a 4-year college. A professor he met his first year purchased all of his books for all 4 years. He started as an accounting major and ended up as a business management major. He did not work during college. He identified with LGBTQ. He has a successful job at a corporation.

Ken came from a two-parent family in rural Georgia. He had considerable family and community support growing up in a small town where he was a star athlete. A strong work ethic was instilled in him very early through the example of his parents and then was expected of him. The church was an essential part of their life. He wanted a different life from what the small town offered. He was a first-generation college student. He went away to junior college to play football before attending a 4-year college. He was not prepared for college. He worked during high school and college. He identified as a student-athlete. He majored in general studies/social work. He is currently pursuing his Master of Arts in Teaching. He is teaching special education and coaching.

James came from a two-parent family in urban Florida. His father, who had been in the military, passed away when he was 14, which impacted him significantly. His mother was a teacher and instilled the importance of a good education in him early. She sent him to the best elementary school. This meant he was one of the only Black students and self-described "token Black" at the predominantly White school. In middle school, he went to a predominately minority school where, according to him, "his eyes were opened to the significant difference in

resources" compared to what he had experienced in elementary school. He went to community college before going to a 4-year college as he realized he was unprepared for college. The church was an essential part of their life. He majored in communications. He went on to get his Master of Business Administration. He currently works in higher education, recruiting students to attend college.

John came from a home raised by his grandmother in rural Georgia. His grandmother was significantly involved in his education and always supported him. Growing up in a small town, he had considerable community support as a student-athlete. The church was central to their lives. He was a first-generation college student and was not prepared for college. He worked during high school and college. He identified as a student-athlete. He majored in Business Administration. He has written several books and is a motivational speaker.

Justin grew up in a two-parent, biracial family in urban Massachusetts. His parents are both well educated, and a college education was never not an option for him. He was sent to the best schools and self-described as the "token Black kid." He yearned to be taught by someone that looked like him but never was. He was a self-proclaimed rebel, so though he had the ability and access, he was not always academically successful. The church was central to his family life and impacted his college choice. He worked summers during college. He did not identify as a student-athlete, although he played college sports. He majored in psychology. He went on to get his Master of Business Administration. He now works as an account executive for a major corporation.

Ron grew up in a two-parent family in urban Florida and later moved to rural Georgia. This move had a significant impact on his life. His father was from Haiti, so Creole and English were spoken in the home. He had a learning disability identified in elementary school but felt he

never got the help needed until he wanted to go to college. He was a first-generation college student. He went to community college before attending a 4-year college. The church was a central part of family life. He always worked many hours to help support the family. He majored in political science and hopes to attend law school one day.

Sam grew up in a single-mom home in suburban Georgia. He was a student-athlete, so he felt the support from coaches and teachers was strong. He was a first-generation college student and was not prepared for college. He was admitted to college on a provisional basis because of his ACT score but graduated with a 3.0-grade point average with a degree in Business Administration and later obtained a Master of Business Administration. He did work during college but did not feel it interfered with his academics. He has a successful career with a government agency.

Tony came from a two-parent home in rural Alabama. His parents both have college degrees, and his mom works in the local school system. He indicated he was closely watched his entire childhood by the community and could never step out of line. College was always an expectation. Education was viewed as a privilege, and he wanted the label of an educated Black man. He attended community college before attending a 4-year college. He did work, but academics always came first. He played college sports but did not consider himself a student-athlete. He majored in business administration and earned his Master of Business Administration. He has a solid career with a government contract company.

Presentation of Data and Results

This study involved one primary research question: How do Black men describe their authentic lived experiences to and through undergraduate college completion? The data yielded varying perspectives but similar experiences among the participants of these Black male college

graduates. Once data collection was completed via Zoom recorded interviews, I utilized the Zoom transcription to conduct multiple data analyses, and coding passes. I updated words that did not come through clearly on the transcription. To ensure member checking, I emailed each participant a copy of their transcription for review, editing and comment. A manual process of continually comparing participants' responses was followed to define and refine each phase of manual coding.

Harper's (2012) antideficit achievement framework anchored the concept for this study and inspired the interview questions focused on pre-college readiness, socialization, and college achievement. Examining what worked well in preparing these students to persist and achieve in an environment where others like them do not allow a revelation of success factors. In this study, the perceived preparation experiences of eight Black male students at four different 4-year undergraduates, PWI, religious affiliated colleges in the southeast United States provide insight into the intrinsic and extrinsic success factors that contributed to their academic journey success of completing a 4-year degree.

This review of interview findings led to eight categories. These emerged from the preset codes of pre-college preparation and socialization and college achievement from Harper's (2012) anti-deficit framework. The broad categories resulted from topics participants mentioned during interviews. They included family and external support, the importance of encouragement and belonging, challenges including underresourced K-12 education and lack of minority teachers, overcoming underpreparedness, learning disabilities, test anxiety, racism, microaggressions, and the importance of a strong group of peers. The categories were reviewed to reduce overlap and narrowed down to three themed categories of most frequently referenced topics from the participants: Influential Factors, Systemic Factors, and Personal Investment. Each of the

categories include intrinsic and extrinsic measures that support their tenacity to complete a Bachelor's degree. These three categories are the basis of this study's findings and themes.

Three categories represent the data gathered after studying and consolidating participants' answers to the semistructured questions. The perceived experiences influencing the persistence of Black men to undergraduate achievement represent the flow of authentic educational journies for these men. Keeping true to Harper's (2012) basic framework with categories intertwining between pre-college and college achievement, three categories emerged. The category of Influential Factors captures the fabric of their lives that gave them the courage and belief that they could go to and complete college. It includes family and mentors, belonging and encouragement to involve having at least one person who truly believes in them, engagement in church and athletics, faculty and staff, peers, and overcoming challenges, including first-generation college students. Systemic Factors relate to the external forces pressed upon them generally beyond their control, including work obligations, labels, finances, resources, teachers, study habits and test strategies, racism, and microaggressions. Finally, the Personal Investment category looks at their feelings, choices, and focus to include opportunities, engagement, cultural competence, resilience, motivation, pride, anger, the pursuit of more, and the quest to reach a goal.

Influential Factors

In this category, participants shared how support from others, feelings of belonging to groups, and encouragement ungirded their belief that they could succeed and overcome challenges. Their success through feelings of encouragement came from several areas. These include shared examples of family encouragement toward degree attainment, faculty and staff reaching out to support and provide guidance toward needed resources, the confirmation and

validation from their church family that they were enough and capable of accomplishing more, the power of being a first-generation college student, and the pressure of not being a first-generation college student and the influence of one person believing in them. All eight participants shared examples of how support from others led to internal self-confidence that inspired persistence toward college degree attainment.

Family Support. Justin shared,

my family put education first and foremost, which is why after I got my undergraduate degree, my father looked at me, and he's like, all right time to start looking at the next level, and I was like, yeah you are gonna have to wait a minute.

Justin's account highlights that he never knew college was not an option in his family. He grew up knowing he was going to college. Justin came from a family whose parents both attained higher education degrees and worked in higher education. He always had access to support and resources. Even so, he indicated that his journey was not always easy because he described himself as a rebel who refused to go to an Ivy league college but chose a little-known college in the southeast. He did not regret his choice and indicated his family did support his decision because it was a Catholic college and his family was "deeply religious."

James, whose mother was college educated and worked as a teacher in the local school district, " yeah, there wasn't a choice for me. College was the option." John indicated,

I was told at a young age that I'm going to college, and it was about family. My aunt and deacons in the church were also very involved in my life – poured into me. We would go on family tours with older cousins visiting their dorms, so we kind of did our own family college tour.

James' mother remained incredibly supportive, assisting him with applying to college and encouraging him to attend the local community college after a few weeks at the state university was overwhelming for him. He felt supported in that decision and not that he had failed. His decision to attend community college turned out to be one of his best because it was there that he learned about college and resources and was better prepared when he decided to go to a private, small 4-year college.

Tony came from a family with firm beliefs about the benefits of higher education, and with both of his parents having completed a college degree, he said it was all he knew, " you go to high school, then you go to college." When asked why he thought education came to be so crucial to his family, he noted:

> Growing up in rural Alabama, our grandparents did not have the opportunity to attend high school, much less college. They knew the life of farming, and it made a living. But they wanted more for their children and then for us. They saw that education could provide that. My parents were encouraged to stay in high school and go on to college. They both have professional careers. So then they passed that on to us. I remember seeing a family in our community; he was a doctor, and she was a lawyer – sort of a power couple. I wanted that. My parents and grandparents supported and encouraged me every step of the way. It was a privilege to get an education. We were taught we needed a degree to get a job because we don't have the white privilege connections. And to see the smiling faces when you know, we told them, hey, we got into college, and then, of course, when I graduated with my undergrad and masters. It made them all very proud.

AJ had both parents that were college educated. His family had saved for college, but unexpectedly a few years before he went to college, his dad left the family and took the family savings. AJ recounts,

> My mom didn't have the money, so she had gotten a job, and three weeks before I was supposed to go, we were able to pay. That was the only college I had applied to, so it was amazing how it worked out at the last minute. I was determined to use my anger toward my dad and get my college degree, and I did.

> Ken, Sam, John, and Ron all had family support, but as first-generation college students, their families did not understand what was needed to get to college and what the experience was like. Ron indicated that

> everyone in the family depended on me. My parents wanted me to go to college and encouraged me, but my older sister went for about a month and played around and ended up coming home. That is why I went into the workforce first and then to community college before going to a 4-year college.

Ron was not an athlete, so he depended solely on his family for emotional support. His mother did come through with signing for a parent loan for him to be able to pay for the expensive tuition. Ken, Sam, and John were all first-generation but were also athletes. They all indicated family support was critical, but they followed up with coaches' help and even referred to coaches as "like family." For Ken, college was never really a topic of discussion within his family. He stated,

> People around me were brick masons or had lawn care businesses and had nice houses. I thought I would probably be a brick mason like others in my family until college coaches

started calling and sending letters about playing football. Then college got real, and my

parents got excited about me going.

He had emotional support from his family, community, and peers, but he had to figure out

everything independently. Sam indicated that his mom was always there to support him but did

not know what he needed to do. He said, "It was mainly my high school football coach that got

me to college. He helped me with applications, visits, and everything. He is the reason I got

there." John lived with his grandmother, who was his mainstay. She kept him on the straight and

narrow and was insistent from an early age that education was the most important thing he could

do. He remembers:

> She held me accountable. Without a doubt, she was my number one influence and still is
>
> to this day; God rest her soul. She never missed a PTO meeting, and she never missed a
>
> school conference. I believe with my whole heart if it had not been for that backing and
>
> support, I would have never made it through school, you know, just looking around at
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> some of my friends and some of the neighborhoods nearby. There were people negatively
>
> influenced by different things, and I am so blessed and thankful I didn't get caught up in
>
> that, and it was because of my support team. It was pretty simple. She would tell me,
>
> "You go to school. You play ball. You come home, and we will make sure we get on
>
> your homework. If you need help, we are going to talk to your teachers. If you don't
>
> know how to ask your teachers, you let me know." She also told me, "You make sure you
>
> get on that bus, get to school, and eat breakfast. Mind your mouth all the time. You mind
>
> your teachers. You mind your authority, young man. You know I don't want to have to
>
> get no phone calls about you. If I get a phone call, I'm coming to school, and I will whip
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> your backside in front of your whole class." And so that was the biggest thing when I was

young that stuck with me and having a mindset of structure. So you know what school is about, do that, then come home. Simple. She taught me a lot and helped me throughout my life.

Undoubtedly, for all the participants, the family influence was critical to their authentic journey toward educational success. The foundation of respecting authority, understanding the purpose of school, structure, belief in themselves and that they could do and be more, and enough freedom to explore their path seem to be some common themes among the participants that assisted in forming their attitudes of persistence.

Belonging. The influence of belonging, which associations can define, collaborations, engagement, interactions with peers one-on-one, within groups, faculty and staff, student services activities, and programs are all examples of extrinsic support measures that lead to feelings of belonging and acceptance. An integral part of the college experience and academic success is engagement with peers and faculty in the classroom and extracurricular activities (Tinto, 2012). All eight participants expressed feeling that they belonged at their college, even though it was predominately white. They all cited the small college environment, the caring and friendly peers, and the faculty and staff as the reason for feeling cared for and that they were where they belonged.

AJ expressed meeting a professor during the first week of his freshman year who heard his story of how he had struggled to come to college. He recounted,

““The professor bought every one of my books for 4 years. I never once had to worry about how I would find money to buy my books. That made such a difference for me. It meant I could focus on my classes and not worry about finding books. But it also always

reminded me that someone there cared about me every semester without fail. That kind of caring and compassion is hard to find.""

John came from a strong community of support and told me that "community is the most important thing ever." He found his community and belonging at college through the football team.

""Being part of the team provided an immediate group of friends, and we had required study groups, which helped too. But I also worked in admissions, so I had that group of peers. Honestly, I felt love from all corners of campus, even the workers in the cafeteria.""

Ken echoed John's feelings as he was on a football team.

""The guys were and still are my best friends. We still stay in touch every week with that group of guys, four or five of us. And we still hold each other accountable. So it's not just feel good friends; we get hard on each other when we start to go wrong. But that group of guys got me through college. They were my support group. They were my study group. Going through it together made it easier, and we did feel like we belonged at the college. We were the football jocks, and there were the art geeks, but we respected each other. ""

Sam believes the essential part of success in education is relationships.

""One word can describe my staying on the right path, getting to college, and making it through college, and that is relationships. Different people along the way, but people always come into my life when needed at the right time to help me feel like I can make it. If it weren't for incredible people that attached me to their hip and say no, no boy you're gonna make it. I wouldn't be where I am today, which goes back to my earlier point

regarding my education experience. It was all about relationships, so if it wasn't for those relationships that I had and the people I know, I wouldn't be where I'm today.""

Tony had such a strong family and community support system he had always felt a sense of belonging. He indicated that "growing up around people who took education serious definitely motivated me to make sure I completed my degree, as well as surround myself with friends and peers who took education serious too." The strong family and community belief in education instills the will to succeed and to know that success lies in having surrounded oneself with like-minded peers toward the importance of education. Ron struggled with feelings of belonging when his family moved from an area rich with cultural heritage to where culture was trained out of him. Losing that part of himself left him longing for a community of support. His family was involved in church, and he found belonging there. But at a community-academic resource center, he found his genuine sense of belonging and academic self. Ron recalls,

> ""Because my father was Creole and we spoke Creole in the home, I was determined to
> have a learning disability. Truth was I was speaking a mixture of English and Creole but
> the people in rural Alabama could not distinguish that. So I went through K-8 thinking I
> was not smart. In high school we moved to a more urban area and a guidance counselor
> mentioned me going to Tulane in New Orleans. It was the first time in my life that I ever
> thought it possible that I could go to college. She connected my Creole roots and New
> Orleans. I did very poorly on the SAT and ACT tests. Crazy enough, my father found a
> little place called Sylvan learning, and I met this wonderful lady who worked there but
> also taught at the local community college. They tested me and I was low in English,
> especially vocabulary. I worked and secretly took money from my paycheck each week
> before I gave it to the family to pay to go to Sylvan. But there was the first place I found

someone who believed in me, encouraged me and helped me think I could actually one day attend college. And it worked. I took the ACT, got my score up and got accepted conditionally to college and it felt so good to no longer be ostracized because of my test scores.""

Overall, the sense of belonging and someone, even one person, believing that you can achieve seems to be an essential theme for all participants as part of their successful educational journey.

Church and Athletics. Engagement in community activities such as athletics and church was a common theme that all participants in the study mentioned. They grew up being active in their communities, and that carried through when they went away to college. Socialization was a practiced part of their lives as children and a practical aspect that proved to be a helpful strategy for college academic achievement. Church and athletics relate to finding that place of belonging and community of people who support and believe in the best of others and their accomplishments. These social constructs appear to serve as support pillars for positivity and achievement.

For Ken, coming from a small, rural town, football and church were the mainstays of the community. Ken remembers,

""I would play football on Friday night with the entire town there, then I would work on Saturday morning, We would go to the local restaurant for a biscuit at five a. m., and everyone would talk to me about the game. So yeah, I was somewhat of a hometown hero. Then we would make it home Saturday afternoon to watch college football on TV. Sunday morning, we went to church and had the extended family, aunts, uncles, and cousins over for Sunday dinner. That was a typical weekend.""

John was also an athlete and had the support of his grandmother, who made sure he was in church each Sunday. She also instilled religion in his daily life – "she made sure I did what I was supposed to do, was respectful, accountable, and honest. If I wasn't, I knew she would bring her wrath on me. Without God I would not have made it." John gives credit to coaches as part of his support team to help him stay focused, especially to help him get to and stay in college. He recounts, "No grades, no playing football. Football was life, so that accountability kept me on track. Study hall was mandatory, and that helped keep me on track also." Sam agreed that "sports kept me out of trouble." Ron's family was, 'heavily into the Christian Church, and they taught me that you have to be smart because God gave you a brain to use to its fullest potential.' James concurred that "church grounded me, taught me right from wrong, and made me want to better myself to make dad and mom proud. My community poured into me." Justin's family was also of deep faith and instilled that faith in him. Justin chose a faith-based college, knowing "the support and community would encourage me and be a good fit," even though he was a self-described rebel. AJ also had a community of engagement, "my dancing is my creative outlet, so having that balanced my studies and that group of friends, well, they are where I found I could be myself."

Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff engagement with students on a regular and informal basis was a critical aspect of academic success for the participants. The fact that they "really cared" and "were always available" were comments made by participants when recalling the interactions with faculty and staff during their years in college. Ken commented,

"''so many good people, faculty, staff, and coaches motivated and supported me – and let me know it was going to be ok when I needed to hear it. Even the lady in the cafeteria

would tell me she was serving me up an extra helping of encouragement when she would
give me my food.""

John stated that

""graduate assistants and coaches, resources for tutoring, and the small college
atmosphere were all part of the important support for me. Faculty taking time, cafeteria
and even janitorial staff encouraging me made me feel support from everyone. Even in
my darkest time, I would run into someone on campus that would encourage me.""

In reflecting on his relationship with faculty; Sam recalled that "once I realized that the
professors really cared, I did not want to disappoint them so I gave 100% all the time."

Ron said,

""When a professor told me I was really skilled at speaking publicly, that encouragement
went a long way to keep me going. People telling me I was smart and could make it was
encouraging. My professors in African American studies taught me so much about our
culture. I could be authentic with them, which caused me not to feel completely
disconnected to the college.""

James recalls, "Faculty and staff giving of their time made my academic process a lot
easier and contributed to my success."

It was a professor purchasing books for AJ for all four years that made a difference, but
in addition to that, he recalls,

""The one-on-one time with teachers, the time after class, and the relationships we could
build because of the small college atmosphere made a difference for me. College is about
figuring out who you are and what you want to do. Having a professor to have a
conversation with about that was really helpful. I had a professor huff and puff at me

once when I asked a question because I didn't understand, and so I cried and felt like I

was not meant or prepared for college. Fortunately, that was a one-time situation, and

there were way more understanding and caring people than not. Also, the counseling

center on campus kept me from quitting my senior year. Just talking with them made

everything seem clearer. So there were so many people combined that helped to push and

motivate me. I tried to surround myself with positivity.""

Justin came from a family of educators, but still, he commented on all the great people at

the college that encouraged him,

""Of course, my dad always encouraged me, but my work study boss in enrollment

management was a guiding force. Academic support staff helped me get through and I

visited every week. Professors H, J, R, and S were all so good about motivating me and

asking questions about what I wanted to do later on. I had such a good connection with

them. My college experience was worth every penny, and I would go back and do it

again. The people, and the relationships made it all work. They were patient with me

while I matured and helped me grow into the man I needed to become.""

Peers. A good group of friends was essential to all of the participants. "Having someone

close to you who was going through the same struggles to share with that could understand your

feelings and encourage you was real. We could keep each other up," remembered Ken. Like

Ken, Tony valued his peers in college and looked back on them as resources, "Friends that took

education serious like I did helped motivate me. Making friends in class was huge for me

because we created study groups from those classes." James recalls having

""friends walking down the same path as you right side by side, you are going through

the same struggles, through the same late night studying…just having somebody there to

experience it with you definitely we were there together, so those friendships definitely

helped me.""

AJ felt the same about his friends as James, "I surrounded myself with people like me who

would push and motivate me; a good support system with my friends definitely helped me."

Justin summed up the importance of his college friendships with, "The people, the relationships

made it all work. Friend groups and outside activities together. I am still close friends with so

many of them. Lifetime friendships." Sam agrees with Justin, "Our college friend group is still

close. We have been to each other's weddings. We call each other every week. And it's not

always good stuff. It's accountability stuff too. Those are lifetime friendships."

Overcoming Challenges. The challenge of being a first-generation college student was

present but seemed minimal to these participants and easily overcome. Four, or half, of the

participants were first-generation college students. Three of the four were student-athletes and

leaned on the athletic framework and coaches to walk them through the college process.

First Generation College Student. Ken, Sam, John, and Ron were all first-generation

college students. The challenges they indicated resulted from being the first in their family to

attend college related to knowing how to apply to college, timelines, how to fund college, and

understanding the intricacies of college resources.

Ken knew nothing about going to college, but college football recruiters began to contact

him during his junior year of high school.

""They started to call me, send me information, and visit my home. They taught me how

to apply to college and complete the FAFSA. They helped me through that process. With

football and my other aid, all my cost were covered. But later I found out about having to

keep a certain grade point average to keep that aid. We didn't know nothing about that.

So I learned that the hard way.""

Sam also learned about applying to college from football recruiters and coaches. He remembers,

""I was struggling with the standardized test scores and couldn't score high enough to get

accepted. Then one day, I got a letter that said I was accepted. I called my coach and was

confused. He called the college, and they told him I was conditionally accepted. I had no

idea what that meant. I had to earn a certain grade point average my first few semesters at

college and couldn't play football until after that point. I was so happy just to know I

could go to college; I didn't care. It was the best news I had gotten because I didn't know

that was possible.""

John was also a student-athlete and indicated he learned about college through coaches and

googling. John remembers,

""My grandmother was such a big supporter and was determined I was going to college,

even though neither one of us knew the first thing about how to apply, how much it cost,

how to pay, or anything else. Again, though, we were surrounded by so many good

people that wrapped their arms around us and helped every step of the way. My

grandmother made significant financial sacrifices for me to go to college. So significant

that I didn't even know until after she passed. But that was what she wanted. She wanted

an education for me and was going to move heaven and earth to make sure I got it.""

Ron received help from his mentor at Sylvan Learning Center. One of his biggest hurdles was

funding. He and his family did not know how much college costs, especially a private college, or

how to pay. Ron said,

""I was fortunate my mom was able and willing to get approved for a Parent PLUS loan the day before payment in full for the semester was due. If not for that, I would not have been able to start college.""

Point of Transformation. When asked if they experienced a particular moment of transformation in their college experience, their answers revolved around the realization that others genuinely cared for them and the authenticity of their educational journey. Ken recalls his turning point, "Yes, I was blaming everyone for my failures except for the person in the mirror. When I realized I was responsible for every action, that helped me grow up to be a man." Justin had a similar awakening, "After almost getting kicked out after my first semester, that was an awakening. I knew I needed to get serious." For AJ and Ron, it was more about finding their academic passion. AJ recounts,

""I realized I needed to study what I was passionate about. Like with acting, I can remember my lines. I switched from accounting to management. Accounting stressed me out, so I wouldn't eat and had heart palpitations. The Provost helped me figure out that I needed to switch majors – it's about figuring out what fits you.""

Similarly, Ron recalls interactions with his professors,

""I really related to my professors in African American studies, and they taught me so much about our culture. I could be authentic. It helped me not to feel so completely disconnected from the whole aspect of university. I think because of my early experience in education with the teacher determining I was learning disabled because I was speaking a combination of Creole and English, to actually embracing my culture, it was transformative for me.""

John indicated his sophomore to junior year was transformative in learning how to study. "I was going to the library to find a quiet place to study. Study hall for football was mandatory, and that kept me on track. No grades, no playing football. That accountability kept me on track." Sam said,

> ""When I realized I was surrounded by people who genuinely cared about me and my success, I wanted to be successful. I wanted to succeed for me, but also for them. They believed in me, and I didn't want to let anyone down because they were investing in me.""

Systemic Factors

Work Obligations. Seven of the eight participants indicated they had work obligations while in college. Ken had a strong work ethic example by watching his father get up at 5 a.m. every morning, and he working every Saturday himself during high school. He remembers, "Yes, I worked during college, but it didn't interfere. I worked after football practice until midnight and weekends at Walmart. It was not a big deal." Tony also worked but indicated, "It was flexible, and academics always came first." For John, who also worked in high school before coming to college, worked at a local restaurant in town. He said, "They were flexible with my schedule with football and academics. I never let work interfere with academics." Sam indicated that he worked but never let it interfere with football or academics.

> ""I was able to get a job with the local parks and recreation department with the help of my professor. I think because they knew her, and she recommended me for the job, he was willing to be very flexible with me. Again, it goes back to establishing good relationships.""

James also did not let work interfere with academics, "You have to focus on the main goal. So, I worked, but that wasn't the main goal – my education was." Justin did not work during the school year until his last 2 years in college, but did work during summers.

""Since I struggled my first few years of college, I focused only on academics once I got serious. My work experience on campus, though, was awesome. My supervisors and peers were some of the most influential people in my college life.""

Labels. James recalls labels in elementary school but not so much in college,

""I was considered a token Black kid at elementary school because I went to a predominately white elementary school. However, I was called preppy in the neighborhood because I went to that school. I never told my mom because I didn't want it to upset her. I think it had a positive impact on me because it showed me early on how the world really was and gave me a taste of what was to come. Like, okay, if it's this way in elementary school, I mean, I'm against the odds already, so I know what it's going to be in the real world, and you know, I experienced that without the labeling, you know I experienced the pushback, the lack of understanding, you know not wanting to understand, so yeah it definitely prepared me, but I would say prepared me in a positive way.""

Justin had a very similar experience with labeling,

""I was definitely the token Black kid. You know my dad set out to give my brother and me the very best educational experience possible. I graduated with 60 people, five which looked like me. And then you just kind of saw throughout your experience, where you know, no matter what like my dad wanted to be the best, but that meant that I had to be you know, one of few. I would say there's lots of names and such you could give it, but it

would just be being that singular individual that stands out amongst the rest, you know

the black sheep because you know that's just the best way to put it.""

For Tony, being a Black man and education itself were labels that he did not view as

meshing,

> ""One label is that as a Black man that education, you know, we needed a degree to get a
>
> job or to even move up in positions because you know we may not have someone who
>
> knows somebody who knows somebody type of relationship in some position. So
>
> knowing that I needed to get an education to, you know, get that job that I want to move
>
> up in the corporate world at that time. So now that I was an educated Black man, you
>
> know, was the label that I carry with me into college, know that that's where I'm going to
>
> be.""

Sam, John, and Ken were student-athletes; all three indicated they carried the label of

student-athlete or jock throughout their educational career. They did feel that it gave them the

advantage of having a solid support group, someone believing in them, and structure to help

them academically. They were known on their small campus as athletes, even in the cafeteria,

which seemed to matter to them. The label brought with it a measure of admiration and caring.

Finances. Ron was not the oldest sibling, but he was the one the family depended on,

especially financially.

> ""I always held a job, ever since I was 14 and I think my grades and everything else were
>
> affected by that. Because the household I was brought up in was very collectivist,
>
> everybody depended on me, specifically financially. When I transferred to the four year
>
> college, I was living in one town, going to school in another town, and working a job in
>
> yet a third town. I spent so much time traveling from place to place. And I was working

evenings and nights. It was so difficult on me. And when my student loan money come in, I had to give the extra amount to the family instead of keeping it to pay for books, or meals or transportation. Finances were a very difficult thing for me in college. And even before. To pay Sylvan to get the help I needed to get my test scores up, I had to secretly hold back money from my check to pay them. It felt wrong, but I knew that was what I had to do to make my education a reality. The financial aid office helped me so much during college. They helped me find scholarships, and gave me a cafeteria card so I could get lunch while I was on campus so I didn't have to borrow swipes from another student. They saw I was hungry and helped me. I am 100% thankful they gave me the opportunity to have some financial relief and focus on my academics. They kept snacks in the office too, so I would go by everyday and get one.""

For AJ, finances were a significant aspect of his decision to go to college,

""I knew I wanted to go X college. I fell in love with it on my first visit. But because my dad left us and took my college money, we had no idea how we were going to be able to pay. I had filed the FAFSA and got my grants, and took loans, but I was still short. Three days before we were to go, my mom got a new job and was able to make payments so I could afford to go. It was a miracle. Then during orientation, I told my story to a group. My orientation teacher pulled me aside afterward and said he wanted to buy my books. That professor bought my books for four years! Yes, for four years he bought every single one of my books. I could not have done it without his help. And his financial help showed me that someone else really cared that I made it.""

John struggled with finances as well. However, his grandmother did a good job hiding that fact from him,

""I knew we were on a payment plan to pay the difference after the grants. You know I had some financial assistance that I had been awarded in high school, and then I also obtained a lot more during my college tenure. But if it had not been for those grants, and you know the different resources that financial aid provided me there's no way I would have finished. And I did what I was supposed to do and kept my grades halfway decent to kept those financial awards. But my grandmother made so many sacrifices for me. So many sacrifices. I remember my freshmen year when I found out that we were on a payment plan. And I found out how much it was. I told her that was too much and I was coming back home and going to go to the local college to get my education. And she said, 'no, no, this is where you need to be. This is the sacrifice I am going to make for you to stay here and do what it is that you want to do so you don't you worry about what's going on back home. You focus on school while I focus on how everything is going to be taken care of financially.' So, I had to finish. I owed it to myself, but especially to her.""

Resources. Resources were something that James was familiar with and even mentioned as part of his elementary school education,

""I attended the elementary school where my mother taught. She wanted me to attend there because they had something called resources. It was a predominately White school, something like 90% White. I had the luxury of attending there all of my primary grades. And during a summer break mom decided to sign me up for a summer program to get me out of the house at the school in our neighborhood. And I remember thinking at the time, wow, this is not my school because it's night and day different. At the time I didn't understand, but the difference was a clear separation of resources. From the way the staff

interacted with students – at my school we got a smile and words of affirmation every day – to the lack of books. So moving into middle school in my neighborhood was like that. I moved to a predominately Black, 99%, school, and the lack of resources and lack of focus on post secondary education was obvious. And just the lack of focus on cornerstones of education like reading, writing, mathematics – that were critical to a lot of students in terms of their growth or lack of growth. And you could see students just getting left behind. So when I went to college, I looked for the resources. I found the tutoring center that was open seven days a week until 11 p.m. which was insane. Resources are so critical from elementary school on. Resources for students, but for the entire family. Intensive resources are needed to make a significant difference in education."""

All participants mentioned the endless resources available in the small, private college setting. The expansive list of resources they experienced includes: one-on-one counseling and advising, tutoring with extended hours, embedded tutoring, career counseling, special programs for minority students, fraternities and sororities, athletics, financial aid office staff that you can meet face to face with, computer labs with a computer available for each student, laptops given to students, student food pantry, student transportation to town, and the list goes on and on. The students indicated that whatever they needed, they found available or someone was willing to make it available to them to assist them in being successful.

Teachers. James felt that teachers make a difference in the lives of young children. He thought he had some excellent teachers, but he also felt he had some that were not engaged like they could have been to make a difference in the lives of the children they were in charge of daily. "Many teachers just wasted those eight and half hours they had every day in school. They

just squandered that valuable time we could have been learning and preparing for our futures. That is frustrating to look back on."

AJ talked about two types of teachers,

""You have the intentional teachers who put in the effort and the unintentional teachers who just don't. I feel like I had a lot of unintentional teachers. I didn't feel like they put in adequate time to help me and invest in me to help me learn since I had ADHD. So in college that was what I loved was the one-on-one personal time that you're able to get with your teachers after class. I mean, like every week or twice a week, professors would stay after class to teach me more or just have a conversation. I was able to have a relationship with them and know they cared about my success.""

Teachers contributed greatly to Tony's success,

""I had so many great teachers, great people and getting to know them they then became like family to me. That really impacted my success in education because especially going to a small college the teachers really cared. I knew I could go to them if I was really struggling or just to talk with them. You know, they were there to listen. They really cared and made sure that we knew we were able to get our done and so that definitely had a great impact on my education. Some of my lasting friendships from college are not only my peers but are also my teachers and staff that have come close as well.""

Ron recalls developing a relationship with several Black professors, and those relationships made a difference for him as he searched to build his cultural identity,

""I was blessed to meet a lot of decent professors, but it took until honestly my third year being there, which was a blessing in disguise. But once I started, you know, researching who were the good professors and networking and talking with the right people, I started

meeting people like Professor X, who's from Africa and is an amazing guy. Also, Professor Y, who is from Africa, taught African studies, society, and culture. Then I met Professor R. I liked him and went to his office hours to talk, but he told me he thought I didn't take things serious enough and was pompous. One day I asked him about it, and he said he thought I was. It was then I realized that I was code-switching. I recently learned that all my life, I had been code-switching; I just didn't have a name for it, and when I learned the actual definition of code-switching, I was like, oh my God yeah, since my entire life, like I act a certain way depending on where I am. He helped me understand that how I speak to people, how to talk, how to walk depends on who I am with. He also introduced me to politics, and it was inspiring. I realized I have a passion for politics, and I loved being inspired and learning something that was out of my comfort zone."''

Study Habits and Test Strategies. None of the participants felt they were prepared entirely with good study habits to perform up to par in college. They all indicated a lack of adequate knowledge on how to study and take tests successfully. Ken found that peer assistance helped develop his study habits,

''"I was not prepared for college. I used the tutoring center and a peer study group. I had a great friend who would come to the computer lab with me and would stay with me and explain things to me. Having that support of a friend willing to be with me and stay with me until I understood things was encouraging. That is having good people around you. It took me a while, but I finally learned very late in the game how to study."''

Tony admitted he did not have a high grade point average upon graduating from high school.

""I had to work hard and had a hard time passing the high school required final math exam, but I had a tutor help me before school so I could pass. I went to community college before 4-year college, and my study habits improved a lot in community college. I took advantage of all the resources, made friends in class, and developed study groups. Peer study groups helped me.""

Also, John said he was not prepared for college with study habits, but the accountability of studying in a group with the required football study group made it a good habit. Sam struggled with test anxiety and was an admitted poor student:

""I went straight to 4-year college. I was not a good student and had test anxiety. I could not score high enough on the ACT test to get accepted into college. I was so stressed. One day I went to the mailbox and had a letter from the college. It said I was accepted. I called the coach and read it to him. He was surprised too. It said I was conditionally accepted which meant I had to earn a certain grade point average the first semester and could not play football until I earned it. We were both thrilled. Now that I was in college, I had to make to prove to everyone that I could. I know I would not have made it at a big college. It was the one on one help of professors, the study group with football and accountability of that, the tutors, the mentors, the tutor center, all the resources surrounding me constantly that helped me to learn how to learn and succeed. I graduated with a 3.0 grade point average I am proud to say.""

Ron was diagnosed as learning disabled at a young age, so he grew up thinking he was not smart. He went straight to the workforce instead of college as a result. He wanted to go to college to establish a better life. It was when he discovered Sylvan Learning Center that he first learned how to learn:

""I had done very poorly on the SAT test. I found out it was a verbal-based test, and since

I spoke English and Creole, I was at a disadvantage. I then took the ACT test. I did a little

better, but not great. They tested me at Sylvan and found I was low in English, especially

vocabulary. After working on vocabulary with them, my ACT score came up by 3 points.

They taught me how to use flashcards to learn new words. I finally got accepted to

college conditionally. It felt good to no longer be ostracized and feel not smart because of

my test scores. I had to continue to learn good study habits throughout college, but going

to the tutoring center, learning from other students in study groups helped me. People

telling me I really was smart and could make it was life changing.""

Racism and Microaggressions. Racism did apply to all participants; however, one

participant, Justin, is mixed race, Black and White. Interestingly, he mentioned struggling with

racism throughout the entire conversation, not just when asked about racism. Not fitting neatly

into either world may have caused his lack of solid cultural confidence, whereas the other

participants had the benefit of developing it. Racism can have a negative physical and

psychological impact on those experiencing it (Zambrana et al., 2017). All eight participants

cited incidents of racism in college; however, their responses were enlightening and indicative of

their cultural self-confidence. Justin, who is mixed race, spoke extensively about dealing with

racism his entire life,

""I would like to have been taught by someone that looked like me. My parents wanted to

put me in the 'best' schools, but I was only taught by one teacher who looked like me. I

was the token black kid attending predominately White schools. Reading literature like

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer in an all-White class, except for me, it would have been

nice to have someone say this is awkward for some and give some perspective. Also,

because I am half black and half white, there was no option on the college application. I didn't know what to put. However, my parents always taught me that whatever it is regarding race giving me trouble, I have it much better. You are never going to be able to control others, and you can't make them give anything. So go out and get that something they want. Go act, and don't sit and listen.""

AJ recalled incidents of racism as well.

Tony recited the advice he had gotten from his mom as a young child that stuck with him throughout his life on dealing with racism.

""Yes, I had to deal with racism. I was the only black player on the baseball team. I couldn't believe it when I heard my teammate refer to me with the "N" word after I came off the field one day. I thought we were all on the same team. So, it made me realize that even in college, I needed to make sure I stayed serious, got the heck out of there, and moved on. My mom always told me to 'use the valley as a stepping stone to get the heck out of it.' I know I am somebody, and I know where I am going.""

Ron remembers facing racism with a classmate.

""I remember when one of the White girls in our first-year seminar class announced in class that she could never bring me home because her daddy would not allow it. I thought we were friends, but that made it very clear to me that she came from a background of racism. From then on, I was very guarded around her and knew the boundaries of our friendship. It was sad to me that the color of our skin had to determine that, but that is reality. I accept that in our world and just keep moving forward.""

Ken also had a significant incident of racism to deal with during college.

""It was Saturday evening after a football game. It was three other football players and me in my car with me driving. The police stopped us. He said I didn't stop at the stop sign, but I did. When he came up to the car, we had on our college football shirts. He said, 'Oh, a car full of hotshot college football players thinking you are all that.' I was very polite and cooperative. He went on for a while, and we cooperated and tolerated his belligerence. He was clearly taking advantage of the situation, but to get out of it, we just did what we knew we needed to do. That is how I handle most situations like that. I just shrugged it off. Do what you gotta do to get to where you know you want to be.""

John and Sam both had very similar attitudes to their incidents of racism as Ken. John said, "I didn't face anything major. I knew there would be some, but I just let it roll of. I just kept going to do what I had to do." Sam remembers, "It was a culture shock at first coming into a predominately White community and college, but we found our place. I grew up in diversity, so I knew how to make it work." James indicated, "You just have to let it fall off your shoulders and not let it bother you."

All of these accounts paint a picture of the reality that racism exists, but with a firm foundation of acceptance and focus on personal goals, they were all determined not to let any incidents deter them from their ultimate place in life.

Personal Investment

All participants mentioned some aspect of their investment in education as part of their success strategy. Whether it was the inherent opportunities they were provided, the cultural richness by which they were surrounded, or the more internal motivation from experiences that led to pride or anger. A common theme for all was a pursuit of more, a better life, a journey to reach a goal they had set for themselves.

Opportunities. Justin acknowledged he was given opportunities others did not have. Because his father worked in higher education, he was sent to the best K-12 schools. However, that opportunity did not always make his journey easy. Justin remembers,

> ""I was sent to the best schools, which did afford me the best education and resources. So for that, I am thankful. However, I was never taught by someone who looked like me. I was always the token Black kid attending predominately White schools. It did help prepare me for my future though it also made me a bit of a rebel.""

James also had a mother who was a teacher and sent him across town to the best schools K-6. He recalls,

> ""My mom sent me to the white school where I remember a clear separation of resources once I had to switch and go to the school in my neighborhood. Resources of trained teachers, books, supplies, computers – everything was so different. I am thankful I had that opportunity, to begin with, but it definitely opened my eyes to the differences, especially in resources. I had a good foundation in elementary school at the predominately white school, and that prepared me for the future, but I was the token Black student there.""

Ron was thankful for his opportunity to attend Sylvan learning center in his early twenties to learn, though later in life, that he was smart and he could attend college. He said, "It felt so good to have the opportunity to learn from people who really cared and to no longer be ostracized because of my test scores." Like Ron, Sam was thankful to be conditionally accepted to college with low test scores.

""Even though my test scores were low, I was thrilled to have the opportunity to go to college and prove myself. And I did. I worked hard and was able to graduate with a 3.0. I was able to turn it all around.""

Tony talked about the opportunity to attend college as a great privilege as that wisdom was passed down for generations from his grandparents, who did not get to complete high school but knew the importance of education. Their verbal wisdom of the opportunity of education translated to his parents completing college and Tony growing up hearing the importance of the prospect of education and then acting on it. John, who his grandmother raised, also constantly heard the importance of the opportunity for education. She ensured he went to school, did his work, behaved, and made it through K-12. When it came time for college, she sacrificed all for him to have his educational opportunity. He remembers,

""When I found out we were on a payment plan, I wanted to come home. I didn't want her to sacrifice financially like that for me. She told me that education was everything. This was her part to do, and mine was to study and make the grades. I will always be grateful for her and the opportunity she gave me.""

Engagement. All of the participants talked about involvement and commitment. They were engaged in activities in K-12, stressing the importance of participating in sports, clubs, and relationships in college to assist with academic success. Ken, Sam, Tony, and John were all college athletes. They talked about the importance of their teams, their peers, the required study halls with their teams, and the camaraderie they had with being part of the team. The most important aspect of being part of a sports team was accountability, to ensure they kept their grades up and stayed out of trouble. Ken cited, "The encouragement from the team and coaches made a difference. I knew people believed in me and cared." John also mentioned the

encouragement from his engagement, "I had support from everyone. Even in my darkest times, I would have someone that would encourage me." Sam kept repeating, "It is all about relationships. Build strong relationships. Relationships will make the difference anywhere." Justin played intramural sports but had the same words about encouragement. "I felt accepted on campus and knew someone everywhere I went. Being on a small campus and being involved in the different activities is the thing. Good connections and relationships." For AJ, who was involved in the arts, his group of engagement was his dance troupe. "I surrounded myself with positivity and like-minded people who would push and motivate me. My dancing is my creative outlet, so being involved with this group was amazing."

Cultural Competence. Cultural competence is a toolbox of skills that allows for effective and appropriate communication with people of other cultures. All participants discussed how to shift between cultures and relate with those from different cultures. They all seemed to have had experience in the predominately white world and thus knew about navigating that culture. Ron remarked,

> ""I didn't know what I was doing until I learned about it in college, but I learned early on how to switch between worlds. I learned what I could say, wear and how I could act. I learned it was called code-switching, but for me, it was just called survival.""

Along with that cultural competence, they also possess a strong sense of cultural confidence. James commented, "Church grounded me and taught me right from wrong. I gained a strong sense of self from my parents and church community. I developed a strong self-confidence to let things, not of my world, fall off my shoulders."

Resilience and Motivation. In asking where that resilience or a deep sense of motivation came from, the standard response from the participants was, "focus on the goal." Ken found his dig-deep strength when he almost lost it all,

> ""When it was all almost taken away from me, I realized how much I wanted it. How much I wanted a different life than I could have back home. I knew I needed to put my head down and do whatever was required to get through it. It made me get more serious about my school work, my future, and what type of life I wanted. I just wanted to have a better chance at life. To have a better chance to take care of stuff, of course, you know I want to make mom and dad proud, but at the end of the day, you know you want to make sure you got a better chance at life.""

Sam also said that "The only way I made it was to stay focused on the ultimate goal, and that was to graduate. I had to do whatever I had to do to make the next step toward graduation." John relied on his faith for motivation, "I know there is greatness in me. So I had to pull that out. And without God, I would not have made it."

For Ron, his motivation came from within and as a motivation for his family:

> ""To have the opportunity to say I was the first to break the cycle within my own culture, within my family, with my own environment, to be a college graduate, and to see the world from a different perspective kept me going. College was a safe haven for me. It was my safe space. It was an opportunity to change my life.""

James' motivation was to "focus on the goal, so in life, I just need to focus on what's ahead. At that time, finishing my college degree was ahead of me, so that was my focus." AJ pulled his motivation from within. "I was determined to succeed. I was so focused that I had the self-motivation; I told myself that I couldn't quit, and I refuse to quit – I won't do that"! Justin joked

that his resilience came from his dad. "The threat of my dad coming after me if I didn't succeed – not really, but I did want to make him proud, so I knew I needed to achieve because he always reminded me there was a next level."

Pride or Anger. Ken wanted to succeed and graduate from college to "make my mom, pops, family, and my community proud of me." Tony also wanted to make his family proud. He said, "I want to walk across that stage knowing I am fulfilling a generational dream in my family and make my parents and grandparents proud." John also had the desire to make his grandmother and his community proud. He remembered,

> ""I can still hear my grandmother saying, 'Do what you are supposed to do.' I wish she could have seen me walk across that stage, but she passed away a year before I graduated. But she was there. She knew I made it.""

Making those that cared about him motivated Sam as well. He said,

> ""Once I realized the professors really cared about me, I wanted to make them proud. The college gave me a chance by accepting me. The professors gave me a chance by helping me and taking extra time to teach me. There was no way I wasn't going to make it. I did not want to disappoint them.""

Ron, too, was motivated by pride.

> ""I wanted to be the first in my family to break the cycle and make everyone proud of me. I wanted to make everyone along the way that invested in me and believed in me proud. I wanted to prove them right and show them that I could do it. And I did.""

James felt a strong need to make his mom and dad proud.

> ""I went to college using my dad's VA benefits. Unfortunately, he passed away when I was 14, so I was determined to make the best use of the funds that dad earned. I knew I

couldn't quit or fail here because this man fought for me and died for me. I also had to succeed for my community. They poured so much into me. I had to make them all proud.""

AJ wanted to make his mom proud but used his anger toward his dad to motivate him to succeed. He recalls,

""I wanted to make my mom proud because she sacrificed so much for me to go to college. She is my reason to be successful, so I can take care of her. My dad would tell me that I would never amount to anything. He said I would be a bum on the street. Then he left us and took all of our savings, including my college savings. I was determined to prove to him, to my mom, and to all the people who helped me to persevere that I would do it. That I could be successful. I could make it and graduate from college. And I did!""

Pursuit of More or the Quest to Reach a Goal. Several participants mentioned their search for more in life or their determination that they were going to achieve their educational goal as influential factors that motivated them to completion. Ken remembers,

""I wanted a different life. I didn't want to be a brick mason. When I almost lost that dream because of grades, I knew how much I wanted it, a different life. I asked them in financial aid to please not send me home I had to stay and finish. It made me get more serious about my schoolwork, about my future job and what type I life I wanted, and what I had to do to get there.""

Tony's pursuit of more was generational. He recalled, "My grandparents and parents expected me to get an education. They believed that was the only way for a black man to rise above." Likewise, John's grandmother was the driving force for believing and sacrificing for his

education. "I had the will and desire to make something more of my life, but that was instilled in me by my grandmother that education was everything."

Sam and Ron both were first-generation college students who were not initially sure about the advantages of a college degree. Still, once they realized others cared for them and invested in them, they wanted to pursue education and the life after a college degree could offer. Sam said, "Once I realized those around me really cared, I listened to what they were saying. I knew they were investing in me, and I didn't want to disappoint them. I began to want a better life." For Ron,

> ""As I began to learn more about my culture that had been torn away from me as a child, I realized I was surrounded by good people who could help me and keep me going to see the world from a different perspective. It was an opportunity to change my life and reconnect with my culture in the process.""
>
> James, AJ, and Justin all had a quest to prove they could succeed. James remembers, ""I had to focus on the goal – in life, I just need to focus on what's ahead. I went to school on my dad's VA benefit, so I had to succeed because he died for me to have that benefit.""

For AJ,

> ""I never considered myself smart, so getting to a place where I could go to college and graduate was a huge accomplishment that I was determined to do. My dad always told me I would grow up to be a bum on the street – I proved him wrong.""

Justin also had something to prove to his dad,

> ""My dad always expected me to succeed because he was college educated and worked at a college. So I had tremendous pressure. I was a rebel and had to do it my way. It

wasn't until I almost got kicked out after my first year that I realized I really wanted to reach the goal. I wanted to make him proud – and I didn't want him coming after me – just kidding. But really, I realized he was right, and I needed to get serious about life and education. Now I have finished my master's degree, and I can't imagine where I would be without my education.""

Summary

Eight men responded to the recruitment advertisement for this study on LinkedIn and volunteered to participate by sharing their authentic educational journey to and through college degree attainment. The eight respondents represented attendance at four private, predominately White undergraduate institutions in the southeast. This qualitative, narrative research was designed to focus on African American male students who beat the odds and continued to complete a college undergraduate degree. Harper's (2012) antideficit theory, which focuses on the success of this group through the lens of advantage, versus disadvantage, provided the framework. Thus, interview questions sought to spark within participants aspects that contributed to their intrinsic and extrinsic success. Their academic, cocurricular, and environmental experiences recalled through sharing their authentic lived experiences contribute to further understanding.

This chapter presented the research questions, data, and evolving themes to give the eight unique, authentic journeys to higher education completion for Black men in America at private, predominately White colleges in the southeast. All participants indicated that intrinsic and extrinsic factors impacted their ability to succeed in their journey. Three categories of Influential Factors, Systemic Factors, and Personal Investment emerged, centering their success around intrinsic and extrinsic support factors contributing to their successful academic journeys. Chapter

5 will present a summary of the study, recommendations surfacing from the research, limitations, and recommendations for possible future research on this topic.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This qualitative narrative research study aims to explore the critical factors that led to successful college completion for Black men. By focusing on success factors from Black male college graduates' lived experiences, a roadmap to college success for this group may be shared with others to encourage increased degree attainment for this population. The lens for this study drew from Harper's (2012) antideficit theory, which highlights students' successes rather than problematic issues. A non-random approach of purposeful sampling from eight Black men from LinkedIn who had completed an undergraduate degree from a private, predominately White college in the southeast United States defined the sample size. The participants' experiences within these categories created a story of their authentic experiences through narrative inquiry. The first two categories, pre-college socialization, and readiness and college achievement, are the focus of this study. A qualitative study using one on one interviews via Zoom captured their perceived internal and external experiences up to and through college and how they impacted their academic success in achieving undergraduate degree attainment. Transcriptions of the recorded interviews were used for coding and identifying emerging themes. The limitations of the study included some aspects of purposeful sampling. Chapter 5 discusses findings, implications, limitations, recommendations, and a conclusion.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to Past Literature

Chapter 1 discusses issues related to Black male access to higher education throughout American history. Though there have been repeated attempts throughout American history to put into practice equal educational access to result in comparable outcomes, the data are clear that we have not yet achieved that goal. Black male students who make it to college have the lowest subpopulation graduation rate. The question of why we still have disparate results is a

complicated one. Many factors, external and internal, have been considered. External factors such as lack of access to qualified teachers in K-12 and lack of access to quality materials and technology, absence of family support and belief that education is worthwhile, deficiency of knowledge of how to get to college and an adequate support system, microaggressions, and racial biases are all factors that can be attributed to Black men not making it to and through college. Internal factors that impact Black men and their academic success have been found to include lack of motivation, lack of self-confidence, and lack of resilience and perseverance.

However, there are Black male students who are achieving and completing an undergraduate degree and doing so in predominately White colleges. This qualitative study sought to look into the authentic journeys of these students with profiles on LinkedIn professional social networking site to document through narrative format what they recalled as crucial to their success. Through the antideficit achievement framework (Harper, 2012), Black male student success is looked at through the lens of what went right instead of blaming what went wrong. By focusing on the positive aspects of their K-16 education experience, their community and family support, what influenced them, how they overcame adversity, and their internal aspirations and emotional toolbox, the qualitative data show a pathway to success that can be valuable to others.

Three primary themes emerged from these narratives: influential factors, systemic factors, and personal investment factors. Each of these themes comprises elements that contributed to their academic success and relate to the primary research question:

RQ: How do Black men describe their authentic lived experiences to and through undergraduate college completion?

Influential Factors

Harris et al. (2014) pointed to a lack of resources, learning and study skills, and academic rigor expectations in early childhood education can lead to a lack of unpreparedness in higher education. Teacher ability, investment, and cultural understanding impact whether minority students are marginalized or succeed (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Hayes et al., 2013; Milner, 2016). The participants all expressed a lack of preparedness for higher education. They indicated a lack of study skills preparation and realization of a lack of resources. Ron and James in particular discussed the slack daily investment of their teacher's rigor in the classroom and realized days were wasted when opportunities for beneficial learning could have occurred. The importance of engaged and invested teachers in our K-12 classrooms cannot be over emphasized. Initiatives have been enacted over the years to provide training and tools to teachers of marginalized students, but stories of sub-par teachers continue to surface. The continuation of deficit thinking about Black male students seems to play a significant role in their negative school experiences (Little & Tolbert, 2018).

Systemic Factors

Justin, Sam, and James had early education opportunities at predominately White schools. However, they spoke of their time there as being a 'token Black kid.' These participants longed for a teacher who looked like them and could relate to them on a cultural level. Being the only dark-skinned child in a classroom was very isolating. They can look back and realize they were afforded a good education, but at a cost of feeling isolated and misunderstood. Tokenism, or being an only representation or symbol of a minority group, to give the appearance of inclusivity is how they described their experiences. A skilled teacher, regardless of color, could take this situation and authentically include the young student by comparing skin color to cocoa

or cinnamon and urging the other students to talk similarly about their own skin tone to help normalize body differences (Albright & Cironi, 2022). As Schaeffer (2021) found, the possibility of a Black male student being taught by numerous White females in America is very high. In schools where 90% of students were Black, only 5% of the teachers were also Black. The participants longed for that connection, the teacher that could authentically understand their perspective. As Brooms (2018, 2019b) and Scott et al. (2013) found, Black male role models can impact self-efficacy, aspirations, and expectations for who they may become.

Racial discrimination has a proven link to negatively impacting academic success (Patton et al., 2016; Range et al., 2018) and mental health (English et al., 2020; Hope et al., 2020). The participants all had experiences with racial discrimination at some point, but they had all diminished it or learned to use it to their benefit on their educational journey. Their comments included from John, "Just shrug it off and do what you have to do to get to where you know you want to be." and from Tony, "My mom always told me to use the valley as the steppingstone to get the heck out of it. I know I am somebody and where I am going." These statements of self-worth exhibit a keen understanding that their journey holds more value than any racist comments or actions tossed in their direction. This focus and a deep sense of purpose in racial socialization seem pivotal in grounding these young men toward success (Butler-Barnes et al., 2019; Cheeks et al., 2020; Metzger et al., 2020). Microaggressions were in the literature as a factor impacting young Black men (Mills, 2019). However, other than the mention of feeling like a token Black kid in elementary school, only one participant appeared to struggle with microaggressions. Ron, who felt his Creole heritage was used to label him as learning disabled, took years to come to terms with his cultural heritage being stripped from him. His unique cultural heritage made him feel like he was an immigrant in his own country. This lack of sense of belonging did impact his

K-12 academic success. Once he was able to find academic support and ground himself in cultural understanding in his early 20s, he became not only academically successful but also personally proud of his heritage.

Mentors, role models, someone who took them under their wing, and someone who encouraged and believed in them were all reoccurring stories from the participants. Mentors have been shown to lead to academic success (Johnson et al., 2015, 2020) and contribute positively to mental health (Hurd et al., 2016). Mentors can be assigned or can occur naturally, such as with coaches, teachers, or others within the educational system (Brown, 2012; Hurd et al., 2016; Ross, 2014), but regardless of how the person of encouragement came into their life, all of the participants agree that these people were pivotal to their success. Comments from participants such as, "People telling me I was smart and could make it," "Encouragement from everyone from faculty taking time to the cafeteria and janitorial staff encouraging me. It made a difference," "People believing in me, taking an interest, caring, and showing me the way made the difference," and "When I realized those around me cared and wanted me to be successful, there was no way I was going to let them down" tells the story of what a difference encouragement can make and how it can motivate students to succeed. These stories of encouragement and believing in the participants' academic success seem to tether them to claim their success.

Personal Investment

Resilience, or the ability to bounce back quickly from change or hardship, is a critical factor in academic success, even more essential than talent (Duckworth, 2016). All the participants told stories of their grit and resilience when they made a conscious decision to push through and show up regardless of the barriers and difficulties they faced. Turner (2020) found

that Black men at PWIs could thrive and be resilient when drawing on their strong cultural identity and collaborating to gain the support they needed for success. These participants shared stories of being strong in their cultural identity while, at the same time, not fearing to ask for the resources available to assist them with their academic success. Their strong sense of identity and confidence to ask for needed resources appears to have supported them in achieving their goals through strengthened resilience.

The internal desire or motivation toward a goal is a reflective process. For a Black man to view himself as an intellectual is the first step toward academic success (Adams et al., 2020). The participants in this study had varying journeys to viewing themselves as smart or capable of college. Still, they all eventually had that revelation that it was indeed an option for them and that they could take advantage of the opportunity given. Once they internalized that college was an option for them, the internal motivation to succeed, the drive to prove to themselves and others that they could achieve, was overwhelming. Encouragement from family and friends motivates (Anumba, 2015). One participant was determined to prove his father wrong when told he would never amount to anything. His negative words provided motivation. It appears that positive and negative motivation can provide the impetus for academic success when applied through determination.

The reoccurring theme of cultural confidence runs as an undercurrent of the participant's stories. Whether instilled in family, church, or community, the ability to overcome negativity and focus on a goal can be supported by a solid connection to community as found by Turner (2020) and as evidenced by the participant's stories. Students of color raised to value education (Strayhorn, 2014), raised participating in religious activities (Toldson & Anderson, 2010), or participate in cultural or historical experiences as youth (Brooms, 2019a) are more academically

successful. The participants in this study experienced all three of these in their youth. They were all raised to value education. They all participated in religious activities throughout their childhood. They all had some cultural experiences during their youth at some point. Cultural confidence did equate to self-confidence in the case of these participants and appeared to have contributed to their academic success.

Limitations

The first limitation was conducting the interviews remotely. Due to COVID-19, the Center for Disease Control and local governments enacted restrictions on travel and face-to-face interactions in an effort to control the spread of this deadly disease. These restrictions were beginning to ease in some areas at the time of the interviews, but many citizens still felt uneasy traveling and being in close proximity to others. To ease those concerns, communications and data collection occurred via email, telephone, and web conferencing using Zoom with transcription. I feel like this worked well as far as engagement because all the interviews went well beyond the 1-hour anticipated time frame. However, I had to rely on a limited view for nonverbal cues and was unable to draw on full-body language nonverbal interpretations.

Second, the sample size of eight participants could be considered too small to be generalized to a larger population. Additionally, their geographic locations were all from the southeast United States. One participant, Justin, came from the northeastern United States, but all other participants were born and raised in the southeast. The limited cultural background was the intent of this study, as was the small sample size, as collecting their lived experiences to academic success was important.

Third, a reliance on the participants' memories of their lived experiences was critical to this narrative study. The specific experiences through the educational system are crucial to

understanding their academic success. Many years have passed since their elementary school experiences, so their recall of highlight experiences was shaped by dominate memories. Those memories could have been influenced by any number of factors over the years.

Finally, the participants were recruited using LinkedIn, a career-oriented social-networking site, and snowballing. Using this specific site, in addition to snowballing, meant that participants were not only academically successful but had also reached a level of career accomplishment and connection. Based on these limitations, the authentic lived experiences may not be representative of all Black male college students in the United States. It is up to the reader to determine if the findings have any transferability.

Recommendations

For future research, this study can be replicated using the antideficit framework to include graduates from diverse colleges and universities to include large research universities, community colleges and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). By expanding this reach, while still using the antideficit lens and recruiting via LinkedIn, a broader range of authentic lived experiences can be compiled to see if any variation in success factors emerge. This study could also be expanded geographically beyond the southeast United States to include all regions of the country. This could also uncover any differences in influences or aspects that support their academic success. By increasing the diversity of perspectives and adding to the authentic lived experiences, richness of the study could grow.

The best recommendations come from the participants. Each contributor was asked, "If you could tell your story on a national stage, what would you contribute as the best way to support other Black men to educational achievement?" It was unanimous that it is important to develop a good support system of positive people that can provide encouragement, and utilize

resources and establish good habits that will lead to academic success. Relationships are the number one common theme that came from their authentic experiences as important to educational achievement. The right people willing to assist at the right time, their willingness to be open to accept the assistance from the relationship, openness to diversity of relationships –the basic human kindness of people helping people seems to make all the difference.

Personal tenacity, or never giving up, and dedication to pursuing the goal was the second most related theme. Taking personal responsibility for overcoming and pressing forward regardless of what is going on around them to remain laser focused on the roadmap to success was heard time and again through their voices relaying their stories. Their personal motivation was instilled through cultural self-confidence, strong community and family support and a belief in their ability that was inspired by a significant other relationship believing in them. John and Andrew had powerful comments about how important surrounding themselves with a supportive group of people was to their success.

John responded,

""You have certain things that people will say is holding them back when that is not always true. You know, there are some people that don't like different races. You know there are still things that go on with different races within the world, all over the world. But at the end of the day, you know, it's on your effort. It's on your attitude. It's on what you want to do because at the end of the day, nobody can stop you but you. Nobody can stop you. And so, take my advice when I say this. And I sound like a broken record, I know, but boy get around some good people in life early. Get coaches, mentors, professors, whoever, pastors, whoever, that you feel like it's going to help you push you along the way because you are going to need support. You can't do it by yourself. And I

can say this as a Black man. In the African American culture, you can't just say one or two things, one or two times and expect to gain our trust. It is what it is. We're peculiar people. So just know you have to intentional about building a relationship just as if you were to build a relationship with that guy or girls that you like. Come to our level. A lot of times people aren't willing to understand. They aren't willing to really sit down and think and imagine themselves in our shoes. Just imagine, you know, gain the truth.""

Andrew said,

""Never give up, and I know that is easier said than done, because sometimes you can allow yourself to get lost. Surround yourself with good people, surround yourself with people who are going to push you. I remember I was reading one book and it said if the people around you are not pushing you, like creatively motivating you, what do you have them around for? If they aren't doing anything for you, let them go. Who you surround yourself with affects you as a person and it's so important, because if you surround yourself with people who don't study, who don't care about education, that is a negative mindset and it is going to pushed on you. At the end of the day, it's not their education that they're earning. You are earning it, and there's nobody else to blame but yourself so definitely having a good support system is important. Also, worrying about the things I can control only, because if I worry about everything, I will drive myself crazy. You need to worry about what's in your control. The fire that fueled me was my dad telling me I wouldn't amount to anything. I could have been like, damn yeah I know, but I took that fire and used it for my success. I mean his words now looking back did so much for me. It was like, ok, challenge on. So, having a support system, having goals to achieve, and pacing yourself will definitely assist with success.""

Justin commented that the most important thing is to never back down and always keep moving forward. James's focus was wholistic making sure that the entire family of origin is educated and has the needed resources to support their children in education. He stated that,

> """We must keep our Black households intact. Keep our Black brothers in the home and avoiding the judicial system at all costs. We need everything to raise our children safely, and find a way to deliver education to the entire household. People look at me now, a well-groomed, well-spoken young man. If only they knew how lost I was when I graduated high school and how terrified I was of life after that. I learn more every day.""

Similarly for Sam, resources and relationships are most important. Sam revealed,

> """I was a good kid. I didn't get into trouble. But when it came to college, I had no idea where to start. So, I must pinpoint and go back to say resources were lacking for me. There were people that put their arms around me and assured me that I was on the right path, and I will be honest with you, most of them were white. So, for me, I needed more resources and relationships made the difference. The right people in my life and the right time, and my willingness to let them in and let them help me.""

> Ken echoed the others regarding finding good people and personal commitment. He replied, """Surround yourself with good people and take their advice. Commit yourself to the journey – commit to finishing and enjoy the journey. If you are scared or nervous, ask the question. Always be confident with what you do. Find a great group of friends, a good support group. Talk to your professors, talk to your advisor; that's what they are there for, to help you. Never waste time, use every minute wisely.""

Tony expressed that taking education seriously is important. He said,

""Find people that take education just as seriously as you do. It's ok to party but know if you don't turn that paper in then your grades will go down and you will find yourself on academic probation. You want to find a good support system of peers that take education seriously. So yes, find a support system that gets involved and studies. Also, talk to and get to know your professors. Go to extra study groups they offer, go to their office hours because at the end of the day they are the ones that you to want to find and ask them to help you with a reference, or concept. Build relationships with a good group of peers and with professors and get involved on campus.""

Finally, Ron wisely shared that you should always believe in yourself, forgive, and love others. Ron revealed,

""Believe in yourself no matter how hard the situation is, no matter what the environmental issues you're dealing with, socio-economic or literally your physical surrounding – believe in yourself. Never ever come into a situation being closed off 100% because if you close up you can't receive anything. And I was able to receive so much knowledge and so much understanding by being open with people. I got opportunities to meet people from different countries and cultures which gave me the change to visit them in their countries. I was the first in my family, other than my father who came from Haiti, to travel abroad. I was able to travel to Brazil, but only because I was open to meeting new people. So always go into new situations open. I would say it is always important to walk around with forgiveness on your heart. Make sure that you always walk around being forgiving and are nice to people. Forgiveness and being nice, kindness, go hand in hand for me because that means you are open to others. Then we can all interconnect through kindness and forgiveness.""

The final question asked of all participants was, "What do you wish campus leadership knew about what you drew upon to successfully complete your higher education?" Their suggestions consist of focusing on providing safe spaces on campus for Black students to meet and discuss relevant topics, as well as hire more Black faculty and staff that can authentically relate to their experiences. Creating an environment where Black men feel psychologically safe and can focus on academic success is important. Part of the environment involves loving and caring for one another in a peaceful, selfless, understanding and encouraging way. Everyone serving each other to improve each other's lives is valuable. Assisting with creating a mindset of completion and an understanding of how to access the resources needed for academic success is also crucial. Finances are important. Providing scholarships other than athletic scholarships is needed. Offering books for free or at a greatly reduced cost to what they are sold are in the market would assist students in having the academic material needed to be successful. Eliminating the option for families to take out private loans which can haunt them for years to come with repayment. Increasing available financial aid, Pell grants, and teaching student financial literacy like budgeting would be of great consequence. Environment, relationships, and finances or access; these seem to be the primary concerns of these participants for college administrators to be concerned with for future Black men that will come to their colleges.

Ron revealed,

""I feel like everyone at college is dealing with something. Obviously, I am just speaking for a Black perspective, but you know for me it's like I feel like everybody has their own lives they deal with, but what I will say is having more open programs to give people the opportunity to have a safe space to speak – like maybe even free counseling. Within the community of the school having an outlet group for people that look the same, and I

know it sounds like I'm trying to ostracize the Black group. I feel like Black spaces need to be more prevalent on all colleges, places where people feel comfortable articulating how they feel and what is going on in their life and let it be a safe space to where nobody's judging. I also think that gives people the opportunity to learn more about each other and our Black culture. I know my experience with getting to learn more about Black culture really gave me a new perspective on who I am as a Black individual and was powerful and gave me extra hope. It gave me an extra push to be like, wow, there are so many Black leaders, historically, that have done some amazing things and people don't know about them. People don't know learning about Black culture is deeper than just Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King, Jr. and being exposed to that, for me gave me a new perspective. It shows you how to be kind to people but also do it in a manner to rule and never lose your sovereignty over yourself and I thought learning stuff like that was so amazing and honestly, I don't think I would have ever gotten that experience not being in college. Honestly, I would not even be able to put these words together to express to you all of this without going to college. Meeting people that I did because of college literally has changed my life.""

Tony expressed,

""I wish they knew that finance is probably one of the biggest things that keeps a lot of African America men away from college. So, I wish there were ways outside of sports to get things paid for; ways to help. We need to increase scholarships or decrease tuition. Also, there needs to be more on campus to do for African Americans, you know to feel like they are part of everything. They need to have a good experience with activities on campus. There aren't many African American teachers either for Black male students to

look up to or go to when there are things in this world, like George Floyd, or Philando

Castille type situations that happen. You know, so there need to be people on campus for

them to feel comfortable to go to that will understand their fears and feelings. So, I would

just say, you have to have things that pertain to them that will keep them interested in

staying at that college. Many Black men come to a college to play sports because they

have a scholarship, but if other than that there is nothing to keep them, they there, or if

they aren't doing well at their sport, then they have no purpose or reason to stay. You

need something else that grabs their interest. So, I would say to campus administrators to

find ways outside of sports to engage the Black male students on campus.""

John commented the college completion is about having the right mindset. He said,

""It is not if, but when you are going to face obstacles. So, I think they should have a

college course on it, the mindset on facing and overcoming the obstacles and having the

mindset of seeking and securing an education. Sometimes you get that mindset at home,

from generation to generation. But if not, you still deserve a fair shot at the same

education.""

Andrew echoed John's thoughts on equal access to education. He stated,

""Everyone should have fair opportunities, but unfortunately wherever you are it's not

always fair. We saw how selfish Americans were during the pandemic. We can be a

selfish nation. So instead of understanding and loving each other, we tear each other

down. We should love and support each other. Another issue is the cost of books. They

are so expensive. I wish everyone had free access to books.""

Justin focused on the environment created by administrators. He commented,

""When you look at your faculty and administration, and you can't see anyone that can relate to the experience of Black men, that should be an aha moment of here's an issue. Hire faculty and staff that look likes the kids you are recruiting. Someone who can speak to the Black experience in true form. And do away with requiring standardized testing. We all know if is based on socioeconomics and not a real indicator of how well you will do in college.""

James agreed with Justin on standardized testing. He stated,

""Let's all work together to understand what is needed to serve all students and make it happen. Know your students and community. Know what they need. I would like to see financial aid for all that truly need it. I think standardized testing should be done away with. We should all look ourselves in the mirror and ask, what can we do for each other?""

Sam's focus was on resources. He declared,

""Resources must be within reach; not resources they have to jump through hoops to get. Being able to say to your school administrators what you want to do, admit you have no direction and them providing you with the resources to help and guide you along the way. Most people don't know how to speak up and ask for what they need. Regardless of their goals and dreams, they will just say they hate something, rather than admit they are lost or lack direction. They need to learn it is ok to admit they don't know how to reach or accomplish their dreams. College administrators need to know this situation exists and be more proactive to push the help and resources on those that don't know how to use their voice to get the help they need.""

Ken's response sums up the uncertainty and fear of fitting in and belonging of going to college, and the importance of an openness to supportive relationships. It is critical to have faculty and staff working at our colleges that are willing to give of themselves to others to help and support students.

Ken replied,

""My family is hard working. I grew up working in the fields on the farm. I grew up knowing how to drive a truck. But when the football offers started to come in, everyone was like telling me to go to college. But I had no idea of who to talk to. I have a son now, and I want him to go to college. No excuses for anyone. Not him, not my nieces or nephews. I told them they all need to go to college and get a degree. They get caught up talking about sports, but sports can only take you so far, for so long. So, focus on the grades and get that degree. I know going to college is scary. You get there and you see someone there with a BMW, and you only have three pairs of pants. But through relationships with people, working together, you can get the support you need to be academically successful and not worry about others. Show your appreciation and know it takes a village. Everybody works together, and sometimes you can give back, you just have to do the right thing to get to where you know you need to go. So have good people at the college that are willing to work together to help students get there.""

Conclusions

In this study, I sought to capture the authentic lived experiences of several Black men who volunteered via LinkedIn, a professional social networking site, to share their educational journeys. These participants were eager to share their stories. They wanted their voices heard and were excited to have the opportunity to share with the hopes of helping others. The purpose of

capturing their authentic lived experiences was to show a roadmap of success they took to obtain their undergraduate degrees. Their stories from the antideficit lens were to reveal how they arrived at higher education, focusing on what went right, not so much on what went wrong. The focus was also on the external and internal factors that propelled and supported them along the way that provided them with the self-confidence and motivation to overcome obstacles and their emphasis on the goal of academic success. All the participants agreed that relationships were central to their success. A strong support group, whether that was through family, church, community, peers, or one caring person that believed in them, made it clear that support, encouragement, and belonging were crucial to their academic achievement. As Sam summed it up, "Relationships, relationships, relationships. A successful education is all about positive relationships."

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Appendix A: IRB Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

March 9, 2022

Tara M. Jones
Department of Graduate and Professional Studies
Abilene Christian University

Dear Tara,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled
"Against the Odds: Authentic Narratives of Black Males' Successful Pathways to Undergraduate Completion",

(IRB# 22-026   )is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate

Dear Invitee,

My name is Tara Jones. I am a doctoral student at Abilene Christian University's education program. I welcome your participation in a doctoral research study that I am conducting titled: The Successful Pathways to Undergraduate Completion of Black Males: An Authentic Lived Experiences Narrative.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore your journey to and through higher education. Specifically, your authentic lived experience navigating completion of your undergraduate degree at a religious affiliated, predominately white college located in the southeast United States. I will use your stories from your experiences to understand how Black men, like you, thrive and accomplish completion of your undergraduate degree. I am inviting you to participate in an online interview where you can share with me your educational journey. I want to share your story of success as richly as possible. The interview will begin unstructured so you can share with me your perception of being a Black man in America and successfully traversing the educational system. I may ask some follow-up questions to ensure we fully explore your experiences. I will share my transcription of our interview for your review to give you the opportunity to elaborate on the details or share new stories after having time after our interview to reflect.

I will protect your identity and use pseudonyms for your name and any other people and places you mention in your stories. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Before our first interview I will need your signed consent to participate. If you would like to participate in this study, please email me at xxxxxx@acu.edu and I will send you the Informed Consent letter for your signature prior to our interview. Please let me know if you have any questions about this study or your participation. Your stories will be significant to other Black males and serve as motivation and a pathway to them, and to faculty and administrators at colleges to implement programs to provide support to Black men to assist in their academic success.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of participation. I look forward to hearing from you.

Tara Jones, MNA, FAAC
Doctoral Student, Abilene Christian University

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN

RESEARCH
on the Black male's college experience

Looking for Black males with an earned Bachelor's degree to participate in a study aimed to better understand your experience and provide resources in support of future students.

These confidential interviews are a part of Tara Jones' doctoral study, "Against The Odds: Authentic Narratives of Black Males' Successful Pathways to Undergraduate Completion."

Contact Tara Jones to Participate,

Appendix C: Informed Consent Letter

You may be able to take part in a research study. This form provides important information about that study, including the risks and benefits to you as a potential participant. Please read this form carefully and ask the researcher any questions that you may have about the study. You can ask about research activities and any risks or benefits you may experience. You may also wish to discuss your participation with other people, such as your family doctor or a family member. Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or stop your participation at any time and for any reason without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Purpose and Description

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore your past experiences as a Black man who graduated from a religious affiliated, predominately white college in the southeast United States. I will use the stories of your experiences to understand how Black men, like you thrive in education through to college completion. If you volunteer for participation, you will be asked to attend one interview through the Zoom web conferencing platform. The interview is expected to take 45 to 60 minutes. During the interview you will be asked to participate in the following procedures: First, I will share the interview guide with you before the first interview so you can see the question beforehand and remember past experiences while sharing your story. The interview will begin with an open-ended question, and I may ask follow-up questions. The initial question you will be asked is: "How do you describe your lived experience to and through undergraduate college completion at a religious-affilited, predominately white college in the southeast United States?" The follow-up questions will be semistructured to allow you to add or give more details of your experiences. Based on the information you shared in the first interview,

I will create a transcript of our interview. I will share that transcript with you using your words so you can look them over and make sure what I transcribed is correct. You will be able to call me, request edits or additions to the transcript, or ask for a second Zoom meeting if you choose to add anything else to your stories. All methods of interaction, meeting times, and follow-up conversations will be agreed upon between us. Given your permission, interviews will be videoed and audio-recorded in the Zoom platform. Your story will be co-created which means that you and I will create it together so that your voice is heard. Following the Zoom meeting and transcript review, I will create the final research narrative. I will give you a final copy of the story to make sure it reflects your voice.

Your participation may be terminated early by the researcher under the following conditions:

- you no longer meet the eligibility criteria

- it is no longer in your best interest to continue the study

- you do not follow the instructions provided by the researcher, or

- the study is discontinued.

You will be contacted by the researcher and given instructions if any of the above happens.

Risks and Benefits

Potential Risks: There are minimal risks to taking part in this research study. Below is a list of the foreseeable risks, including the seriousness of those risks and how likely they are to occur: Psychological distress: While sharing your story, you may encounter minor psychological distress. This risk, given the means of this study being an interview where you choose what you want to share with me, is less likely.

Confidentiality: This study is intended to protect your confidentiality and identity with pseudonyms. This risk, given the means of this study being an interview where you choose what

you want to share with me, is less likely. The researcher has taken measures to minimize the risks correlated with this study. However, if you do experience any problems, you may contact the researcher. Abilene Christian University or the researcher does not plan to pay for any issues you may experience due to your participation.

Potential Benefits: There are potential benefits to participating in this study. Such benefits may include your authentic story giving voice to the experiences of Black men that have completed an undergraduate degree that can be used to help others and inform educators and policymakers. The researcher cannot guarantee that you will experience any personal benefits from participating in this study. However, your participation in the research will be of great importance to assist college administrators and educators in the approaches and strategies they need to provide to adequately support Black men like you to succeed in college.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Any information you provide will be confidential to the extent allowable by law. Some identifiable data may have to be shared with individuals outside of the study team, such as members of the ACU Institutional Review Board. Besides these required acknowledgments, the researcher will protect confidentiality with:

1. Pseudonyms will be used on all records.

2. Stored electronic data on the computer will be protected by a password and stored in a home office.

3. All paper data be in a locked safe in a home office.

4. Recordings will be digitally shredded after the thorough, multistep process of transcribing

5. Your participation is voluntary. At any time you do not feel comfortable, you may stop participating.

Contacts

If you have questions, complaints, or concerns about the research study, the researcher is Tara M. Jones, a doctoral student in Organizational Leadership emphasis in Higher Education, at Abilene Christian University. She may be contacted at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxx@acu.edu. If you are unable to reach the researcher or wish to speak to someone other than the researcher you may contact her faculty advisor, Dr. Bryan Patterson, at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxx@acu.edu. If you have concerns about this study, believe you may have been injured because of this study, or have general questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact ACU's Chair of the Institutional Review Board and Executive Director of Research, Megan Roth, Ph.D. Dr. Roth may be reached at (xxx) xxx-xxxx xxxxxxx@acu.edu 320 Hardin Administration Bldg, ACU Box 29103 Abilene, TX 79699

Consent Signature Section

Please sign this form if you voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Sign only after you have read all the information provided and your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. You should receive a copy of this signed consent form. You do not waive any legal rights by signing this form. If you wish to have a copy of this consent form, you may print it now. You do not waive any legal rights by consenting to this study. Please note: Electronic signatures are now considered an acceptable form of documentation. You may use an electronic signature on the document.

_____   _____   _____
Printed Name of Participant   Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____   _____
Printed Name of Person   Signature of Person   Date
Obtaining Consent   Obtaining Consent

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Institution: Abilene Christian University

Interviewee: Pseudonym

Interviewer: Tara M Jones

Research Question: How do Black males describe their authentic lived experiences to and through undergraduate college completion?

Introductory Protocol

Thank you for your time today. This interview will begin rather formal as I need to include standardized language and information, but then I hope we can have a conversation.

Because your responses are important and I want to ensure that I capture your authentic voice, I would like to record our Zoom meeting today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [If yes, thank them and then remind them again you are recording when you begin].

I might also take some written notes as we go along. I can assure you that all of your responses will be remain confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting you from the the transcripts. The recording will be labeled with a pseudonym and any other people or places mentioned will also be given pseudonyms. The transcript from our interview will be used to inform my dissertation. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

You have been selected to speak with me today because you are someone who might be able to help me understand the experiences of Black men in higher education at a private, predominately white, religious affiliated, four year college. My research project is a narrative of how Black men experience the educational system in the United States Kindergarten through four years of college – K-16. I am interested in learning about your

education journey, your perspective in your own words. Who and what influenced you

internally and externally to achieve your academic success of completing a 4-year

undergraduate degree?

This interview should last about 60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions

that I would like to ask. If time begins to run short we can move along. If you have

questions during the interview, please feel free to ask them, and if you are not

comfortable with answering any of the questions, please let me know and we will move

forward. Do you have any questions?

Appendix E: Matrix: Interview Questions

	Research Process	Interview Question
How do you describe your educational experience to and through college?	Experiential knowledge

Storytelling | Were you a first-generation college student? If yes, how did you acquire information about college? Did you experience stress or anxiety around the college application experience? Did anyone encourage or assist you through the process? If yes, what was the special skill set that assisted you? What factors do you think helped you achieve? How were college aspirations cultivated in your life? <u>What</u> <u>identities</u> <u>or</u> <u>labels</u> <u>did</u> <u>you</u> <u>carry</u> <u>on</u> <u>your</u> <u>K-16 journey?</u> |
| What values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions about higher education did you grow up with? What do these beliefs look like for you? | Pre-College Social Engagement and Preparation

Commitment to education

Educational justice | Did you receive support from your family of origin to grow up valuing education? Did you have a mentor outside of your family that influence you – a coach, teacher, pastor? What prior educational experiences prepared you for success in completing your coursework at college? When did you develop positive study habits? When did you first think about attending college? Did participating in sports influence your decision to attend college? Were finances, financial aid or awarding of a scholarship impactful on your decision to attend and stay in college? |
| To what do you attribute your academic success? | College Achievement

Commitment to educational justice | Did you have obligations outside of being a student in high school or college? If so, what were some of them? Reflecting on the obligations, what impact did they have on your academic focus? Did study habits impact your success? How did your interactions with other students, faculty, or staff contribute to your success? How did your peers at college and outside of college motivate and support you? Your family? How accepted did you feel on the college campus? What about the college environment proved helpful to you? How beneficial was it to attend or participate in campus activities or programs? How did you persist through college despite transition issues, racist stereotypes, academic underpreparedness or other negative forces? What was most memorable about your first two years versus your last two years of college? Do you think at some point along the college journey there was a transformation or period of time where your academic development changed? |
| What was the most | Experiential knowledge | Who was your support system? How did you cultivate meaningful, value-added relationships? |

	Research Process	Interview Question
influential factor that helped you achieve your degree?	Storytelling	What motivated you to keep pushing forward? Did you experience support barriers, systemic biases, or microaggressions? How did you react? What did you do? What was the most beneficial in working through this challenge?
If you could tell your story on a national stage, what would you contribute as the best way to support other Black men to educational achievement?	College Achievement Permanence of racism Challenge dominant ideology Commitment to social justice and educational justice	What do you wish the campus administration and other stakeholders knew about issues of everyday challenges faced by Black men pursuing education? What do you wish the campus leadership knew about what you drew upon to successfully complete your higher education? What policies would you like to see changed in seeking and securing education for Black men in America?

Appendix F: Pre-College Preparation & Socialization and College Achievement

1. Engagement
2. Belonging
3. Not being the only Black person or learning how to navigate being the only Black person
4. Critical peer connections
5. Nurturing faculty support
6. Staff support
7. Surrounded by support
8. One person believing in them
9. One on One interactions with faculty, staff, peers
10. Learning how to effectively study
11. Overcoming learning disabilities and associated stigmas
12. Overcoming test anxiety
13. Academic support through college resources and outside resources
14. Resilience
15. Ignoring racism and microaggressions
16. Motivation
17. Challenges of under-resourced K-12 education
18. Impact of involvement in athletics
19. Influence of coaches
20. Role of religion
21. Family support: extended family, lack of family support, surrogate family support
22. Impact of finances
23. Teachers before college
24. Reasons for selecting college
25. Reasons for attending 2 year college first
26. Success strategies
27. Enrollment challenges
28. Lack of preparation for college
29. Social engagement on college campus
30. Study group engagement
31. First generation college student impact
32. How and when learned about college
33. Label before and during college
34. Influence of work obligations
35. Personal Outlook – Cultural Competencies