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Academic Agenda, Goal Setting, and African American Male Student Persistence at a Predominantly Black Institution

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Hamilton Jean-Baptiste Raymond

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Academic Agenda, Goal Setting, and African American Male Student Persistence at a

Predominantly Black Institution

by

Hamilton Jean-Baptiste Raymond

MA, Long Island University, 2015

BS, State University of New York at Buffalo State College, 2009

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

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Abstract

Low African American male student graduation rates in the United States have been a concern for higher education administrators, and more strategies to address their challenges are needed. This basic qualitative study addressed the experiences of African American male students who persisted to graduation at a predominantly Black institution in the northeastern United States. The institutional departure model and goal setting theory formed the conceptual framework for the study. Nine African American males who graduated from the institution described their experiences with academic goal setting and a graduation agenda, through one-on-one interviews. Key findings included the challenges of financial concerns, making supportive connections, and being engaged with university life. Goal setting and pursuing a graduation agenda were supported by interacting regularly with diverse faculty and staff, having work study positions, and participating in athletics and student organizations. Moments of individual connection and support from staff and faculty members helped students pursue academic goals. The project constructed to address the gaps is a 3-day professional development curriculum. Professional development is necessary to ensure all members of campus are focused on the orientation of first year students and their families to support retention through graduation. Academic agenda and goal setting can and should occur across campus and in multiple settings. Positive social change implications of the project include increased stakeholder awareness of supports necessary to retain African American male students in predominantly Black institutions.

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Dedication

It is with my deepest gratitude and warmest affection that I dedicate this project study to my mother, Marie Suzette Jean-Baptiste, who has been a continuous basis of encouragement for me, and who has taught me the value to never quitting, no matter how difficult the circumstance.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

The problem that was investigated through this study is low African American male student graduation rates at a predominantly Black institution (PBI) in the northeastern United States. Overall graduation rates at PBIs are below 20%, and graduation rates for African American male students at PBIs average 15% (Hardy et al., 2019). These institutions face similar challenges to historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and other minority serving institutions, because students share many of the same characteristics and encounter many of the same barriers of low-income, first generation, and underprepared academically students (Hardy & Jones, 2015; Kanganda & Arugute, 2019). HCBUs and PBIs play an essential and often mission-driven role in providing postsecondary access and training to low- and middle-income Black and other minority students (Harper et al., 2004; Palmer & Avery, 2017). However, only 40% of African American students who enroll in college to pursue a bachelor's degree go on to graduate (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Low African American male student graduation rates at a PBI are an issue for many campus administrators. Though college administrators at the local study site have sought to increase the academic success of African American male students in higher education, interventions aimed at retaining all students have been better funded than interventions aimed at any subset of the overarching group. Administrators have long recognized that academic campus life is not constructed to support all learners equally. But to understand why African American male students are not retained at the same rate,

factors this cohort faces while on campus would benefit this group of learners by revealing missing support. Though PBIs and HBCUs were created to help African American students navigate higher education successfully (Ginder et al., 2017), less research has been focused on the role that a graduation agenda and goal setting might play in student persistence to graduation. To understand the graduation rates in the local setting, an investigation was conducted at a PBI in the northeast United States that has an enrollment of 98% African American students. The focus of this basic qualitative study was to explore the experiences of African American male students who persisted to graduation at the study site. By exploring the experiences of successful students, new approaches can be created for increasing the persistence and graduation rate of African American male students, which could contribute to positive social change in similar settings.

Rationale

A college degree increases the likelihood of employment, future earnings, and personal satisfaction, yet the challenges in earning a degree differ based on race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Ottley & Ellis, 2019). More qualitative research is needed to explore success that African American male students have in persisting until graduation, especially the role that academic goal setting may have played in African American male student success. A basic qualitative design allowed me to explore goal setting in the context of other important decisions, such as selecting the right institution for an individual learner. The route that students take to PBIs may involve more than choice, and attendance may depend on the prospective students' physical location or residence,

whether they are urban and rural, and whether they are first, second, or third generation college students in their family (Hilton & Bonner, 2017).

This investigation may reveal significant findings for the field of education, as the Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that by 2032 people of color are anticipated to become the majority, which indicates trends in college completion by race and ethnicity (Wilson, 2016). The demand for postsecondary education has increased (Swail et al., 2015), but educational attainment levels continue to be substantially lower for African American males. Because within the next 20 years the United States will become significantly less European American, it is important that researchers find solutions to improve the rate of college completion for African American male students, which has consistently been lower (Swail et al., 2015). The under-representation of African American male students has repercussions not only for the individuals themselves but also for the United States. Whenever a group of individuals are not interacting and achieving at optimum levels, the country loses talent that could enrich the lives of many (Seidman, 2019).

Understanding the issues that affect African American male student graduation rate include (a) the role of self-belief; (b) geographic and socioeconomic status; (c) access to financial aid; (d) level of faculty interaction; and (e) impact of social networks could inform researchers and practitioners who are educational policymakers, academicians, and parents (Raymond, 2016). These challenges are particularly difficult for young African American men attending college and contribute to these students temporarily or permanently leaving college at higher rates than their contemporaries (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). The attitude achievement paradox is a concept described as

African American and Hispanic underachievement as relative to European American levels potentially caused by low expectations leading to low aspirations. However, when the supposed mediator is measured, African Americans have higher educational aspirations (Kirkegard, 2019). The attitude achievement paradox is important for developing an accurate perception of the experiences African American male students face when pursuing higher education (Toldson, 2019).

Definition of Terms

Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs): Incorporated in the Higher Education Act in 2008, these are defined as institutions that (a) serve at least 1,000 undergraduate students, (b) have at least 50% low-income or first-generation degree-seeking undergraduate enrollment, (c) have a low per full-time undergraduate student expenditure in comparison with other institutions offering similar instruction, and (d) enroll at least 40% African American students (American Council on Education, 2017).

Academic goal setting: Academic goal setting is defined as the ability to set, prioritize and monitor progress towards realistic and realistic short-term and long-term academic goals that enhance attention, direction, energy, and persistence toward goal-relevant activities (Locke & Latham, 2002). Setting academic goals affects the behavior and action of a student and facilitate attainment of a specific academic performance.

Campus involvement: Entails the amount of bodily and emotional energy that the student dedicates to the academic experience. Involvement may be solely scholastic, such as devoting considerable energy to studying, spending ample time on campus, or interacting frequently with faculty and other students. Involvement may also be

extracurricular, such as actively participating in student organizations (Farley et al., 2011).

Faculty and staff: Faculty in several educational institutions essentially means the members of the academic staff comprising of teachers, lecturers, or professors in an educational institution, whose main responsibility is to teach or impart knowledge to students. Staff means all the members of any organization, who usually consist of professionals who are experts in a specific arena (Upen, 2018).

Graduation agenda: Graduation agenda is defined as the minimum qualification that one should attain to successfully complete a diploma/degree or other course of study in a college or university (Kelly & Schneider, 2012). Graduation agenda includes aspect such as the grades of a student, settlement of financial arrears, and the completion of the course work.

Retention: For this study, student retention was defined as the continued enrollment of student from first year to the second year. Another term that is used, sometimes interchangeably, is student persistence (Burke, 2019).

Support services: Support services is defined as a cluster of facilities and departments and activities that are provided to make the learning process easier and more interesting for students. In this study, support services serve as the interface between the institution and the student. The quality of higher education depends directly on the student support services provided in various modes of higher education (Kaur, 2016). Often if universities and colleges are deficient in providing support to their students, then it does not serve the purpose of education but only distribution of degrees (Kaur, 2016).

Significance of the Study

A prospective college graduate may have several transcripts from multiple institutions, which are later combined into a single degree transcript, rather than for graduating purposes. Some students enroll in college simply to see how it feels rather than having a graduation agenda (Mayanga et al., 2017). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), applications to postsecondary institutions have increased from 11.7% to 14.1% from 2000–2015 for African American students. Though this increase in applications demonstrates progress in enrollment, colleges and universities are required to continue to find ways to retain this population through degree completion. Understanding the obstacles that lead to the low number of graduation rates of African American male students guided a 3-day intensive diversity training for faculty and staff across universities and colleges.

After examining the experiences that lead to the academic success of African American male students at a PBI in the northeastern United States, the data address academic administrative policies and student affairs interventions for students who are falling short in persisting. Graduation from a PBI may represent the first step in developing entrepreneurs. In 2016, there were 25 million Americans who were starting or already running their own businesses (Simovic, 2019). However, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), in the professional setting more specifically higher education, only 13% of educational administrators are Black; within that 13%, 34% are African American male. The lack of African American men in professional positions has implications for students of color, mainly male students, experiencing marginalization in

the curriculum, isolation from both campus and home communities, feelings of impostor syndrome, and racism (Turner & Grauerholz, 2017). More insights into the interactions and positive goal setting experiences of successful African American male students may contribute to increased opportunities for this marginalized group of learners. Increasing the graduation rate of African American students could create more positive mentoring opportunities. Future exploration of this subject may also help remedy the disparities of African Americans and other marginalized racial groups in larger state school settings.

Research Question

In this basic qualitative study, I focused on a research question that allowed me to explore students' perceptions about setting a graduation agenda and academic goal setting in college: How do African American male students who graduated from PBIs describe their experiences with academic goal setting and a graduation agenda?

Review of Literature

African American male student retention continues to be a major issue for the higher education community (Siedman, 2019). Researchers, using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, carried out a study on the enrollment and degree completion of Black students mainly attending the 4-year public institutions and discovered that higher education remains a cultural struggle for the students of color (Allen et al., 2018). Interest has been paid to underrepresented groups of students whose retention and graduation rates continue to be below those of the majority of students (Siedman, 2019). But despite a great number of studies conducted on college graduation

and retention rates through the years, there has been a cohort of students that have been underrepresented throughout the research.

Most African American students join and complete their college education at PBIs and HBCUs whose enrollment accommodates diverse cultures (Allen et al., 2018); however, the number who persist to graduation is still low. After these students arrive on campus, obstacles become more prevalent, which leads to a lack of persistence. About four in 10 (41%) African American students who start college as first-time, full-time freshmen earn a bachelor's degree from those institutions within 6 years—a rate of 22% below that of their European American peers at other 4-year public institutions (Nichols & Evans-Bell, 2017). Further, the graduation rate of African American male students are particularly low. Overall graduation rates at a PBI in the northeast United States for African American male student average is 9%, which is lower than the national average of 15% (Hardy et al., 2019).

The review of literature expresses the graduation rate of male students of color at PBIs and the issues related to it. I conducted this study to gain a broad understanding of the significance of persistence and graduation to advance educational excellence among African American male students. As I reviewed the literature, I connected a suitable and relevant conceptual framework to assist with the research problem relating to African American male students who graduated from a PBI and their experiences with faculty, campus environment, and student support services.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, participant narratives were examined through multiple theories. No single theory can capture the academic life cycle of the participants; therefore, this study applied three driving theories: dropout process model, institutional departure theory, and student attrition model. In the context of university higher education at the undergraduate level, the dropout process model and the institutional departure model presented by Spady (1970, 1971), Tinto (1975, 1993), and Bean (1980, 1982) have often been used to explain the process of dropout or perseverance and even to anticipate such events. This study approached the evolution of the models presented by all three researchers, since versions of the models are found in the literature. These learning theories and conceptual framework of this study can increase faculty and staff understanding of the reasoning behind college completion for African American male students. When male students of color transition to college, they are continuing to learn who they are, trying to belong in college, performing well academically, establishing meaningful experiences on campus, developing positive relationships, and earning enough credits to graduate (Brooms et al., 2018).

In their explanatory models of the college dropout process both Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto (1975) stressed the processes of community and educational incorporation as critical impacts on student perseverance. Each model views tenacity/departure decisions largely as the effect of a longitudinal procedure of association between the student and the educational plus social organizations of the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). Overviews about perseverance can be

misleading due to the distinctiveness of each institution, academically, ethnically, and otherwise. The main hindrance is a lack of combined efforts to better comprehend student retention, where participants at all ranks of the institution become involved in redefining and amending their retention programs (Mayanga et al., 2017). Bean (1980, 1982) also noted that the retention agenda is further complicated by the lack of uniform standards/metrics that define student success.

Spady (1970, 1971) introduced the undergraduate dropout process model theory, which was among the initial efforts to move in the direction of an interdisciplinary style to understanding student retention rates. Spady's opening idea was the notion that the student attrition development is best described by an interdisciplinary tactic that involves both the collaboration between the individual student and the specific college setting in which the student's features are exposed to impacts from a range of sources. A student operates with two main institutional structures—the educational structure and the societal structure—and as students are confronted and exposed to numerous influences, the systems affect them in a different way. Though triumph in the educational system is measured by grades, the societal system is measured by outlooks, interests, and character natures that complement those of the institution (Burke, 2019). Further, pre-college factors should be considered when looking at the graduation rate of students of color, especially the male students at postsecondary institutions such as students' goals, upbringing, and societal norms (Raymond, 2016). Other stresses such as academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal stresses play a significant part in the presence or lack thereof of persistence for African American male students

Another direction in this study was features of Tinto's (1975, 1993) institutional departure model theory, which reasons that the social shift for arriving, first-year learners is crucial to their achievement. During the phase of parting from one life (transitioning from high school to college, leaving their hometown) to higher education institutions, students must develop new associations and a new community to be successful (Burke, 2019). Similar to Spady (1970, 1971), Tinto agreed that there are two main environmental aspects: the educational system and the community system. Tinto contended that a student's choice to leave an institution must be founded in one of two jurisdictions: academic or social. In the educational structure, a student must have a level of obligation to personal objectives (grades, graduation, etc.) to continue to be inspired and persist (Burke, 2019). Equally, a student must establish a certain level of blend of institutional commitment, normally demonstrated through community network and school pride. The mixture of individual goals and institutional obligation is what leads eventually to a student's resolution to return to school (Burke, 2019).

Bean's student attrition model (1980, 1982) postdates Spady (1970, 1971) and Tinto's (1975, 1993) models and contends that none of the preceding models are testable with a direct association. Bean's model attempts to create a direct path of connection so administrators can point to a precise variable that shows why students drop out of the institutions of higher learning. Bean put forward that male and female students depart from institutions for diverse reasons, but institutional obligation is the most significant variable in clearing up student attrition for both genders. Male students leave an institution even though they are contented with what the institution has to offer (Burke,

2019). In implementing all institutional model theories, it is worth mentioning that Bean's concept is grounded in arithmetic inquiry and computable data, whereas both Spady and Tinto's are based on sociology and beliefs (Burke, 2019).

Even though all the researchers differed in some views, one view they all agreed on was that majority students drop out of institutions for a number of reasons containing, but not restricted to, educational trials and societal issues (Mayanga et. al., 2017). Additionally, there are the different scholastic and socioeconomic experiences among students and what they convey to the education setting (Mayanga et al., 2017). With that said, all three researcher's model theories played a vital role in this study. It is important to consider the institutional culture of the study site as well. Collected information could additionally assist in this investigation.

Review of the Broader Problem

Literature on students of color in higher education has been the focus of academic research. Yet for the male African American student, the challenges they face are intertwined and ongoing, and their opportunities for success are limited. Research has focused on the access to education, academic performance and retention, and educational outcomes (including graduation; Brooms et al., 2018). Institutions of higher education are in place to develop the intellect of individuals while perfecting skills that will enable all students to become prominent members of society.

Persisting to Graduation

Need to focus on lower graduation rates and improve supports The completion rate is lower for African American students than among European American students

(Eller & DiPete, 2018). Recent studies have shown 34.1% of African American male students in the United States completed their undergraduate degree compared to nearly double that of their European American counterparts (Lucas, 2018). Colleges and universities should be wary of how poorly it reflects on the institution when students are unable to persist and rates of attrition continually increase for specific student populations (i.e., African American males; Boyd, 2017). Predominantly White institutions (PWIs) have also not implemented programs and supports necessary to confront these issues among African American males attending their colleges (Lucas, 2018). But retention is a strategic matter for institutional victory that attracts a range of stakeholders, such as federal, state, and private parties, and influences institutional rankings (Mayanga et al., 2017). The millennial workforce and the new generation of students requires adaptive student-centered approaches for their success.

A multitude of factors can contribute to students' retention and persistence (Boyd, 2017). Stereotypes as a challenge to persistence Stereotypes often create threatening environments for students of color, especially the male students on college campuses. African American male students are confronted by a deficit perspective that translates into lowered expectations of them across the college milieu-both academic and social, leading to them as outsiders on campus (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Research has suggested that (a) African American males dealt with internalized emotional states due to stereotypes, (b) stereotypes were strengthened in numerous ways, and (c) they persevered despite of stereotypes by challenging, disregarding, and dismissing stereotypes, as well as lightening stresses associated with stereotypes (Boyd & Mitchell, 2018). Socioeconomic

status as a factor on persistence. Additionally, research has noted that African American students' lower academic and socioeconomic resources are the biggest drivers of the graduation gap between African American and European American students (Eller & DiPete, 2018). Socioeconomic status, students' expectations, and math teachers' expectations have also been statistically significant in predicting African American male student's educational attainment, and students' expectations were the only predictor of bachelor's degree completion (Goings & Shi, 2018). African American male students have also had difficulty with college completion because of factors such as financial support, support from professors and peers, and larger classroom sizes (Anumba, 2015).

Despite these challenges, research on African American male student experiences indicated two critical components of their college experience that positively shaped their persistence efforts: (a) peer-to-peer bonding and associations with other African American males and (b) mentoring from African American faculty members (Brooms & Davis, 2017). These findings suggest that these social networks and micro-communities both enhance and support African American male students' persistence in college. African American men possess mental strength, ambition, and have great intentions to gain a baccalaureate degree, but support such as familial support can help with persistence (Beale et al., 2019).

The Analysis and Assessment of Aspiration

African Americans constitute 2 million of over 21 million full- and part-time undergraduates enrolled at America's more than 4,300 colleges and universities, the vast majority at public institutions (Strayhorn, 2016). Studies have revealed numerous

correlates of African American male student success or failure in schools; data showed how reading and math deficits experienced early in the education pipeline can accumulate over time and have long-term outcomes and college aspirations (Strayhorn, 2016). Consequently, African American male students are more likely to be assigned to special education, suspended, or expelled from school before reaching a college campus. But African American male students' college aspirations and expectations are informed by aspirational, social, and familial capital (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Research on nontraditional Black male students showed that the participants were intrinsically motivated to succeed in college to make a better future for themselves and their families, and support from their peers, family, and children also played a role in their success (Goings, 2016).

The Role of HBCUs

Although the term *HBCU* was not coined until the Higher Education Act of 1965, the first HBCUs were founded in Pennsylvania and Ohio before the American Civil War (Stefon, 2011). The sole purpose of the development of HBCUs was to provide Black youths—who were largely prevented from attending established colleges and universities due to racial discrimination—with basic education and training to become teachers or tradesmen (Stefon, 2011). These institutions were created to provide the needs for students of color to help students to persist and graduate. However, to keep that goal intact, the completing agenda needs to be modified beyond the traditional idea of getting a college degree, completion of the baccalaureate degree, or transfers out of the institution (Mayanga et al., 2017). Roughly 30% of African American male students who

enroll in a 4-year institution earn a college degree, and less than 30% of African American male students remain at their first college for the duration of their collegiate career (Ottley & Ellis, 2019).

When it comes to institutions serving the minority, PBIs are not as commonly understood as the HBCUs. Even though they both serve mainly the African American students, PBIs were officially recognized by Congress through the PBI Act of 2007. According to a report by the National Student Clearinghouse, most students in PBIs enroll on a part-time basis, with the completion rates of the full-time students in 4-year PBIs being 51.5%—three times higher than 16.6% of the federal graduation rate. These rates are higher because they are based on student movement across states and institutions; however, records from the Department of Education show that the graduation rates of the students of color in PBIs are 15% compared to 60% of their European American counterparts (Jones, 2017). PBIs were introduced to cater to the low and middle-income African Americans and even with their standardized programs (Beale et al., 2019), but their efforts have not gotten the desired results.

Campus Engagement

As the presence of African American-centered program increase on college campuses around the nation, Brooms and Druery (2019) focused on identifying the benefits African American male collegians receive through engagement in these programs. The in-depth qualitative mentioned the experiences of five African American male students in the Black Male Leadership Collective, a Black male initiative program at a midsized historically European American 4-year institution. The authors studied the

five African American male students' narratives, and the students expressed how the leadership collective served as a culturally enriching environment and contributed positively to their overall college experience.

Despite the increasing variety in higher education, African American students have always had lower rates in retention than the European American students. The Department of Education has come up with programs to try and remedy the situation like the GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program). According to research done on students attending public HBCUs, (Beale et al, 2019), those that participated in such government-funded programs were better prepared when joining college. The students attained higher grades when they joined college and made a significant improvement in their study habits and how they prepare for their tests.

Student engagement is a powerful tool that aids in retaining students at an institution. Kahu and Nelson (2018) described the three contributions of understanding the student experience. First, the educational interface is a tangible way of representing the complex interactions between students and institutions, and how those interactions influence engagement. Second, the researchers mentioned four specific psychosocial constructs that play a role in the student experience: self-efficacy, emotions, belonging, and well-being. Lastly, demographic characteristics associated with lower completion rates are retained and do go on to complete their studies, while similar others do not (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Additionally, Brooms and Goodman (2019) stated that African American male student's academic engagement increases their opportunities for success and helps

counter various deficit perspectives held against them. The authors continue to mention that a critical area of investigation for African American males' college experiences centers on their involvement in clubs and organizations. Most recently, Black Male Initiative (BMI) programs have been developed as a measure both to address some of the challenges which they face and provide them with a support network on campus (Brooms & Goodman, 2019).

While academic officers found ways and means to provide opportunities for African American students to graduate, European American-McNeil (2016) explored in detail the retention rate of African American male students at HBCUs. The study shows a rapid decline in retention rate over 4 years, European American-McNeil's study shows some understating to why this cohort through a series of interviews. When comparing African American male students at PWIs Strayhorn, et al. (2014) provides insight on PWIs and its effects on the psyche of African American male students who attends these types of institutions, by exploring the campus climates and concluded that African American male students often struggle with a sense of belonging. Which circles us back to the importance of HBCUs and how formidable its services are in the success of African American male students.

A data collection made by the Office of Civil Rights (2012) discovered that the disparity in teachers' races and their gender was a great impact on the performance of the students, with the majority of them being European American and female. Even though the PBIs have a majority of teachers as compared to the other institutions only 3% are male (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), and most of them have an average

of one to two years' experience. In a study done on six males, both juniors and seniors (Beale et al., 2019), the students felt they could not relate with their teachers. The limited experience on the teachers did not give them enough exposure to handling underrepresented students. Chun and Alvin (2018) described a need for the grooming of more African American male educators to be able to act as mentors for college students. According to Beale et al. (2019), the lack of mentors for the students meant that they did not have anybody to look up to in their strife for a great college experience. The students pointed out that the presence of more male academic mentors would increase their persistence and desire to succeed in college.

Brooms and Davis (2017) noted that the lack of mentors who can impact positively on the students could lead to some men developing association problems. This inability to mingle with their peers could also cause a strain in their pursuit of academic excellence and this trickles down even to the workplace. The acquisition of a college degree puts one in a better position to secure employment, however, the lack of said degree means minimal or no chances of employment. Pattillo (2017) stated that the crime rate in urban areas especially among the black communities is a major concern as the unemployed youth who need to survive are drawn to anything other peers are doing to earn a living. Institutions have come up with mentorship programs to help the students be persistent in their studies, an example being the Male Institute of Leadership and Excellence by the Morgan State University. The students interviewed by Beale et al. (2019), noted such programs where students of color would share experiences, bond, and

engage in other social activities together gave them a sense of brotherhood and hence the will to complete their college studies.

The interaction of students with faculty, both formal and informal have shown great results in improving the retention rates of the students of color. Research has shown that those students that attend HBCUs get more reassurance from the faculty than those attending PWIs (Komarraju, 2017). The interaction with faculty especially outside the classroom has a great impact on the confidence of the students. The students attending HBCUs stated that their professors were very supportive of their ambitions, acted as mentors, and encouraged the participation of students in all forms of college and out of college activities that boost their studies. Komarraju (2019), conducted the study on faculty-student interaction on undergraduate students both male and female attending a public university. The author went ahead and noted that the setting of high expectations by educators contributed greatly to the student's commitment to their studies. Continued communication between students and their coaches or mentors regularly, either face to face or through texts and emails, has created a deep connection between the two, helping to ease follow up on students.

The study revealed that the interactions included guidance on career, interactions being very respectful, the faculty being approachable and offering assistance even out of campus, their attitude was caring and they acted on the negative experiences suffered by the students in the campus. The group ascertained that these factors boosted their commitment to their education and the willingness to complete and graduate from college. Beale et al. (2019) discovered in their study that colleges that use a responsive

mode of interaction with the students have seen great progress. Advisors and professors are alerted immediately a student performs poorly in an exam, fails to attend or enroll in a class. They can take the relevant action instead of waiting for the students to approach them when they face difficulties. The faculty or advisors reach out to the students as soon as they discover a problem and conduct frequent follow-ups to get the desired results. According to Palmer and Avery (2019), most African American students are first-generation college students and have no idea how to traverse the higher education environment. Therefore, when faced with difficulties, if not well informed they will not know who or how to approach the same.

Research has shown that colleges with student engagement initiatives have noted an increase in their student graduation rates (Bisoux, 2018). According to Avarad et al. (2018), the placing of students into groups with other students of the same interests and taking the same classes, tracking the daily performance of the students, and giving advice when negative results are noted. These models also known as the deficit remediation models have proven to be very successful. The implementation of strength-based approaches, where students learn their strengths and are encouraged to make use of them in their studies have shown great success (Soria & Taylor, 2016). Allowing students to make their choices on their key and minor classes based on their strengths is also important. Doing this before the students begin their degree program ensures that they do not change majors multiple times, which could be a hindrance to the completion of their degree.

The culture of institutions has been identified as a contributing factor to either the success or failure of students. Bohanon (2018) noted that students of color who attended PWIs suffer from feelings of isolation and easily suffer from depression and other related mental health issues. These feelings and the inadequacy in college preparedness mainly contributed by prior education experiences like deficits in writing have put the African American student at a disadvantage (Bohanon, 2018). PWIs traditionally try to resolve the situation by enrolling the students in remedial classes (Beale et al., 2019). Because these classes do not contribute to the student's credit hours, yet cost tuition dollars, many students in remedial coursework end up dropping out of school. The adoption of a growth mindset by institutions where they focus on refining the norm (Bohanon, 2018). The author observed that the institutions developed a culture where their main focus was not on grades but the learning progress of the students. They had the chance to retake their tests and correct their course work until they obtained a fitting grade. This approach creates a growth mindset in the students and they are always striving to get the best of grades.

Renick (2018) observed that persistence should be addressed on an individual basis to make significant progress in retention and graduation rates. The University Innovation Alliance comprising of 11 institutions of higher learning engage in exchange programs for best practices to improve graduation rates. According to Renick (2018), the grouping of students into units with similar academic interests helps reduce the overwhelming burden associated with traversing life in college. However, students who can't afford to pay for their studies are offered scholarships by institutions like the HOPE

scholarship by Georgia State University. The need to come up with financial aid that covers all students regardless of their scores in tests or credit hours is necessary. The author determined that with the members of the Alliance applying technology to monitor and predict student behavior, they can come up with solutions to handle the cases individually and have increased their retention and graduation rates tremendously.

According to Soria and Taylor (2016), institutions that applied the approach of a strong base, where they viewed the students as high achievers are becoming very popular. The authors noted that, in institutions where education is done through the assessment, teaching, and creation of learning opportunities that allow the students to identify and use their strengths to handle academic problems were applied, have increased the potential of the students. However, this approach is only successful when the teachers are also aware of their strengths which they can use to strengthen their instruction and remain relevant in their area of expertise (Soria & Taylor, 2016). The students and the faculty must undertake an assessment to determine each of their strengths. When students realize their strengths, they can choose a major with ease. In other institutions, inbound freshmen were asked to take StrengthsFinder for them to learn a minimum of five of their talents and have the chance to engage in discussions with faculty, career advisors, and peers on their strengths and the courses they can pursue from the same.

The interaction between the students and the institution is a major area of concern (Beale et al., 2019). Tinto's institutional departure model (1993) focused on the personal attributes and prior experiences that students brought with them when joining college and how they affected either the persistence or lack thereof by the students. The collaboration

between the incoming freshmen with their diverse pre-college experiences has to merge positively with the institutional characteristics for the student to be successful (Beale et al., 2019). The authors observed that prior visits to the institutions and interaction with advisors help the students prepare themselves psychologically for their future academic environment. Beyond mentorship, professors who build stronger relationships with their students through their course content, dynamic learning strategies, and creating a challenging environment where the students are free to contest the ideas of their professors have had great results from their students (Beale et al., 2019).

The orientation of new students especially the students of color in PWIs should be done as soon as the student's enrollment is complete (Palmer & Avery, 2019). The authors pointed out that such programs created opportunities for the mingling of Black students, members of staff, faculty as well as their peers, creating the sense of a community. It also ensures that students learn the different parts of the institution and identify the offices where they can get assistance, for whatever reason. Chun & Alvin (2018) also noted that the prior interaction of students and faculty creates a welcoming environment. The incoming students feel they are valued and they are in the right place, this goes ahead to help in the motivation of students to complete their studies in the same school without dropping out or transferring.

The introduction of workshops that teach soft skills to students is also a great program to increase campus welcomeness at academic institutions (Beale et al., 2019). These workshops integrate studies on accountability, money management, cultural competency, time management, personal image, and opportunity help the students learn

tips they can apply to help them survive in college and their preparation for the professional world (Palmer & Avery, 2019). The diversity of the American racial composition requires that students have enough tolerance for every ethnic group for them to be successful in their careers. The assignment of all first-years to a unit advisor is also a great program (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Research has shown that having a group advisor who can keep tabs on the students by monitoring their class attendance, academic performance, and study habits ensure that the students graduate at the right time and none is left behind or feels neglected (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Teaching students on the significance of setting urgencies, organizing their assignments, and setting short- and long-term goals is of great importance.

The changes in recruitment plans have also affected the institutions of higher learning (Chun & Alvin, 2018). The authors noted that the recruitment of students from a broader range of racial and income groups could help reduce the microaggressions that students especially African Americans face in institutions of higher learning. This helps all the students to integrate and learn about the different cultures leading to a more tolerable academic environment that is respectful and prepares the students for the challenges in the professional world (Renick, 2018). The commercial world is changing rapidly, and this means that the students completing their higher education must be ready both intellectually and socially. According to Palmer and Avery (2017), institutions must and are changing their curriculum composition to be able to accommodate the changes of the 21st Century and ensure their students can compete vigorously in the job market.

Researchers have found out that the retention and graduation rates of colleges depend on several unique factors. Beale et al. (2019), observed that each institution was different and this in turn either affected or positively impacted the graduation of their students. The authors noted that HBCUs and PBIs mostly serve African American students from the low and middle-income class and those that are the first in their families to join college (Banks & Dohy, 2019). However, even with these similarities, the difference in the institution's location, enrollment qualifications of the institution, students' backgrounds, the student's previous academic accomplishments, and their preparedness when joining college determine the institution's graduation rates (Beale et al., 2019). A large number of HBCUs enroll those students who attained a lower SAT score in their college entrance exam. PBIs are mainly located in urban areas and have been found to have better performance from the students (Palmer & Jared, 2017). On the other hand, some HBCUs and PWIs tend to be located in remote areas where the population especially of African Americans is low.

Learning Communities

Roberts (2013) conducted a study concerning first-year students who were attending college full-time in a HBCU college in Georgia, and the author revealed the importance of learning communities. Learning communities brought about collaboration, enhanced educational development, engagement, and social integration. According to Astin's model (1993), learning communities were important especially to first-year students, for they help them in adjusting to college life. The feeling of being a community with similar interests and through learning actively, the loneliness and isolation felt

especially by the African American students attending PWIs is combated. The learning communities provide students with a medium to express themselves freely and also participate in critical thinking (Roberts, 2013). Students in the study revealed their fulfillment with the benefits gained by joining learning communities, which included development in their self-esteem, the building of stronger interactions with their peers, and increased motivation in their academics.

The introduction of support groups has also shown results in the retention of African American students (Hunn, 2014). The study groups led by fellow students also incorporate faculty, graduate students, and administrators. According to Blake & Moore (2018), the introduction and implementation of study groups increased the graduation rates of Black students. The writers noted that the program was mainly meant for the poor performing students to help them improve on their performance. The introduction of Black Male Initiative Programs like The Brothers and Scholars Program, (Brooms, 2018). An interview on a group of students in the programs determined that, the students in such programs interacted with academic mentors and had access to unlimited resources in human capital (Brooms, 2018). These created a sense of accountability and the students were responsible for each other.

The introduction of new teaching strategies by the faculty has proven to be quite helpful. One such program is the decentralization of studies, where the professor engages the students more by encouraging social studying (Palmer & Avery, 2019). This environment helps to promote cooperation among the students, and it allows for the provision of productive criticism to help the students in their studies. According to Banks

and Dohy (2019), the use of examples that mirror experiences of the African American students enhanced the focus and commitment of students to their studies, they also felt much appreciated and this increased their likelihood to complete their studies. The authors also stated that this created a constructive connection between the learners and their professors which in turn enhanced the progress of the student's educational character.

Institutions have also implemented programs called peer mentorship, especially for students of color (Beale et al., 2019). These programs help in building governance skills and ensure that the students are building constructive relationships with their peers. This in turn could lead to students having the will to complete their college education. Holding occupation counseling or internship conferences is also crucial for the success of African American students (Chun & Alvin, 2018). The authors noted that when students discuss their professional mentors and those who contributed to their career choice, the professors and advisors get a better understanding of their students and can be able to come with strategies to assist them. Researchers (Banks & Dohy, 2019) have shown that students who are intellectually and socially incorporated form progressive attitudes about the institution and this influences their aspiration to persist in their studies.

Financial Aid

The Minority Serving Institutions have one mission in common, to provide a chance for the underrepresented racial-ethnic minorities who include but not limited to African Americans. These institutions are supported by funding from the federal government through the Department of Education (Palmer & Avery, 2017). However,

they must meet some conditions for them to qualify for the grants. PBIs must have an enrollment of a majority of African Americans, and the grants offered are mainly to assist the institutions in the development of their infrastructure and improvement of their academic programs. According to Bohanon (2018), even with financial aid being available for students, most of them have little or no knowledge of how they can access the same. PBIs largely serve students from low or middle-income families and this means that finances are a major setback for the students, most of who also have to work to support their families.

Initially, students could be offered scholarships and grants to help them in their education (Lillis, 2018). However, this has now changed and financial aid is mainly in the form of loans. The lack of education about financial aid and the lack of knowledge on where to positively make use of the same has led many to shy away from the very much needed financial assistance. Dulabaum (2016), stated that the programs funded by the government required a student to be registered in a high sum of credit hours so that their grants include insurance and housing, with those students living on the campus proving to perform better. However, with most students enrolled in PBIs on a part-time basis, they are locked out of these programs. Private firms have also come on board to assist the low-income students but offer the scholarships to the high achieving African American students, an example being the Gates Millennium Scholars Program. Davis (2019) interviewed some of the beneficiaries of the Gates grant who have to maintain a very high GPA to be eligible for the funds.

From the interview, Davis (2019) discovered that those students who received the Gates scholarship obtained a higher chance of choosing to attend prestigious colleges. On the other hand, they confirmed that their choice of college would have been different if they had received the scholarship earlier on. As much as financial aid is available, the restriction on credit hours and GPA makes it very hard for most of the students of color to access them. Bohanon (2018), also noted that those who received grants took out other loans and are expected to repay the same even with the risk of low employment prospects. Even though many forms of financial assistance have been put in place to try and help the low and middle-income African American Students, the conditions for their access make it difficult for most students to make use of them. Davis (2019) observed that if the restrictions on financial aid could accommodate all students regardless of their GPAs, then this would increase the chances of African American students to complete their education and graduate.

The Importance of Family

According to Palmer and Avery (2019), a strong and dependable family unit plays a major role in the student's decision and willingness to pursue higher education. This has a great impact on the student's prior experiences in the education sector that largely influence their adaptability in the institutions of higher learning. Studies on a group of students attending the same HBCU (Beale et al., 2019), showed that students from households where parents are actively involved in their academics perform better than their colleagues whose parents are not greatly concerned about their studies. Wibrowski and Matthews (2017) noted that the cohesiveness of a family unit provides the needed

morale and encouragement for students to persist and strive in their education goals. Healthy structures of the nuclear family act as the cheerleaders of the students in their endeavor to pursue not only academic but even career excellence.

The parents from middle-class families greatly emphasize on competitive behavior while those from the working class emphasize on cooperation behavior (Palmer & Avery, 2019). According to the authors and research that was done, these two-family backgrounds greatly impact the student's interaction with their peers in school. The students from working-class backgrounds faced a great challenge in their education since the academic environment is competitive by nature (Beale et al., 2019). However, those from the middle class will face the challenge of fitting in especially in the PWIs. The transitioning into institutions with diverse cultural compositions, could prove to be a challenge to all students especially African Americans. Participants from Beale's interview stated that having several people that were committed to their development was a crucial component in their desire to succeed.

Diversity of Students and Faculty

Awokoya and Mann (2011) conducted a study on a group of African American students attending a PWI to find out the implications of studying in a mixed-race institution. The students confirmed that their integration with other cultures played a major role in their academic progress and retention in college. According to Awokoya and Mann (2011), the presence of an assorted culture in the school helped African American students gain an increase in their self-awareness as they learned more about the others and they taught others about their culture. Hunn (2014) noted that PWIs promoted

the African American sense of belonging by diversifying their curriculum. He stated that with the faculty including themes and disciplines that were relevant to the students of color in their courses, they helped the minority students feel valued. The grouping of students with diverse cultures in similar study groups helped the students gain trust and confidence in one another. The introduction of cultural enhancement field expeditions ensured that students appreciated the different cultures represented in the school.

All over the country, a majority of faculty are European American even in the PBIs. Banks and Dohy (2019) stated that the students felt disconnected especially culturally with their professors who were of different ethnicity. They felt misunderstood by the educators and those in HBCUs faced micro antagonisms from European American professors and this contributed greatly to their failure in the pursuit of their college education. The institutions whose faculty was diverse showed great results in the student performance. Interaction with European American educators previously might have created the wrong impression for the students and they feel their success doesn't matter to the teachers (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

The diversification of hiring opportunities for teachers ensures that there is some sort of balance in gender, race, and qualifications. This diversification may help in the creation of a more relevant curriculum culturally. According to Hunn (2014), the inclusion of culturally relevant course work in the curriculum increased the rate at which the African American Students succeeded in their studies. The presence of a diverse faculty helps in the presentation of research with views by people with different experiences and perspectives. A great number of employers in the current century prefer

to employ graduates who have had educational experiences that equip them with problem-solving skills with people of different perspectives from their own (Beale et al., 2019). Those who have been involved in service-learning and have helped in solving problems that affect their community directly have also proven to get a better chance at employment.

Campus Resources and Supplemental Instruction

In the study conducted by Awokoya and Mann (2011), participants reported that the availability of resources like the library for their research and the use of supplemental instructional programs influenced their progression and retention in college. The findings from the study collaborated with those discovered by Cooper (2006). Tutoring and support programs contributed greatly to the improvement in the study habits and note-taking skills of the students. The students observed that the availability of supplementary study material boosted their confidence in their classes. Studies have shown that the availability of study material relevant to their culture increased the reading capabilities of the African American students and this went further to enhance their overall performance (Hunn, 2014).

Role of Media and Stereotypes

The mainstream media has always portrayed the African American community as failures and troublemakers (Beale et al., 2019). These perceptions that the students have heard since they were young, grow with them and it becomes quite difficult to shake off even in adulthood. According to Beale et al. (2019), a study carried out on a group of students revealed that they suffer the same stereotyping even in institutions of higher

learning, where the professors feel that European American students are better performers than Black students. Researchers have also mainly focused on the negative aspects of the African American community and rarely on the positive parts. Kinsey (2019) stated that the negative perceptions of African American students even by their peers have led to most students of color feel that they do not belong to certain institutions.

According to Palmer and Avery (2019), most of the students attending PBIs are first-generation students and have no idea how to navigate college life. This affects the students both psychologically and socially. The media focus on the positive side of the African American community ensures that the students can be proud of their identity and this builds their self-esteem. In many instances, students of color have been termed as less capable than European American students, with professors especially in PWIs blatantly expressing their disregard for the African American student's capabilities. Interviews carried out by Beale et al. (2019) on the experience of African American students in PWIs, showed that the students felt isolated and did not have the support of the institutions they attended in dealing with the microaggressions they suffered. Most of them were in a constant state of trying to prove their intellectual capabilities, which is notwithstanding their previous accounts of success.

A yearlong qualitative study done on a group of students by Renick (2018), observed that high achieving African American students who have not been included in many research studies indicated that the misconceptions about their race and culture informed their accomplishment principles. The author found out that students with solid ethnic achievement personalities tend to develop adaptive behaviors to help them cope in

the culturally diversified college. The college environment especially in the PWIs is quite hostile to the African American students (Beale et al., 2019). Students join some of these institutions expecting them to be very accommodative and liberal spaces, however, what meets them is quite the opposite and this can be very confusing and challenging.

PBI Programs to Support Students

Even though the enrollment into PBIs has been increasing steadily over the past years, the political environment especially after elections has also contributed to this surge. The Black community and other minority groups have become more involved in the politics of the day, to ensure that they can be in leadership positions that can enable them fight for the rights of their people. The current civil unrest in the United States of America following extrajudicial killing of George Floyd, an African American male has seen the black community engage in the heated political debate on the rights of African Americans.

However, the graduation rates of the institutions don't match with their enrollment. Research has shown that only 1 out of 13 African American students are likely to graduate in a class (Shapiro et al., 2017). This has been a cause for alarm with the PBIs receiving government funds depending on their student composition and their overall performance (Beale et al., 2019). The Department of Education provides federal grants to PBIs to help them in capacity building and infrastructure development. Since they serve a majority of students from low and middle-income families, these funds come in handy.

The low graduation rates of students in PBIs have prompted them to come with programs to help and remedy the situation (Palmer & Avery, 2019). The creation and expansion of the student support services that offer to counsel have ensured that students have mentors in the school whom they can look up to in their quest for academic excellence (Beale et al., 2019). The implementation and completion of online programs to ensure students can access study material from anywhere. According to Palmer & Avery (2019), with the academic environment evolving every day, institutions have to come up with plans that not only keep the students in school but encourage them to complete their degrees. The introduction of gender-specific programs has also come in handy, an example is the Black Men Alliance (Beale et al., 2019). The institutions invite successful Black men to come and provide mentorship to the African American male students.

The improvement and expansion of laboratory capacities and technologies have also proven to be a very great investment (Palmer & Avery, 2019). The use of modern technology and equipment ensures that the students of color are exposed to a similar practical field like their colleagues in prestigious institutions. This not only boosts their morale in science subjects but also gives them a fair opportunity in the job market (Beale et al., 2019). It also does help to curb the perception that black students are not performers in sciences and technical subjects. These technologies greatly contribute to the willingness of students to complete their college education (Palmer & Avery, 2019).

The application for federal competitive grants which are another source of funding by the government to help in the creation and support of programs in the field of

Science and capacity building. According to Beale et al. (2019), these grants help in the education of professors who might want to further their studies or socialize in a given field. Research has shown that institutions that invest in their faculty have a high performance by the students (Palmer & Avery, 2019). The introduction of orientation programs and community outreach programs where the institution gives counseling to students before they transition to college has also encouraged more students to pursue higher education. According to the Department of Education (2017), faculty exchange programs ensure that professors have a better understanding of the African American culture and can, therefore, relate to the problems facing their students and be better placed to help them through the struggles.

Career advice should be given at the beginning of one's college life, not depending on their career prospects but mostly on their strengths (Palmer & Avery, 2019). This ensures that students don't change their majors in the course of their academic year which can easily lead to dropouts. The Department of Education also noted that, the offering of financial advice to the students and their families created literacy that was lacking leading to better management of grants offered (DOE, 2017). Research shows that the offering of advice even in the after-office hours is very productive especially for the students who have to combine studies and work, which is almost the case to all African American students.

Institutions encourage students to join extracurricular clubs to help them interact with their peers. Beale et al. (2019), the interaction with peers both in and out of class is a major boost to the self-esteem of most students especially those who are first-generation

students and it also creates a sense of belonging for them particularly the African Americans in PWIs. The mingling of students with their peers ensures that they can share experiences and mentor one another (Palmer & Avery, 2019). This gives the students the motivation to pursue and complete their college education. The setting of goals by the professors encouraged the students to strive in their studies for they felt appreciated.

Programs to increase the on-time graduation of students have obtained great results (Renick, 2018). The author noted that the introduction of programs that act as bridges between community colleges and enrollment on a full-time basis in an institution helps students keep track of their studies. At the study site, most African American students combine their studies with work off-campus. However, Renick (2018) observed that this may lead the students to neglect their studies and focus mostly on their jobs. The introduction of working part-time on-campus depending on one's major of study comes in handy. The students can make money, learn while on the job, and still not neglect their studies.

The provision of faculty mentoring, participation in workshops, and research help to create awareness and expose the faculty to the different environments they can face when dealing with students (Beale et al., 2019). This helps in the general preparation of faculty and it also boosts their ability to connect with the students when they can understand the issues facing them. The development of programs where speakers in different fields are invited to the institution to interact with both the faculty and the students provides a great learning opportunity for both parties (Palmer & Avery, 2019). The university community including students and faculty needs to hold open discussions

and share ideas on problems and solutions or changes that can be implemented to handle the same.

This openness ensures that everybody is on the same page and are working towards the same goals. Researchers (Palmer & Avery, 2019) have shown that the use of technology to ensure timely and effective guiding efforts guarantees that those students who show some form of difficulties early on in their studies are offered assistance and this, in turn, makes certain that they stay on track with their graduation and portrays the caring attitude of the college to its students. The mentoring of faculty members, especially those who are new to the institution, by an experienced member creates an interactive relationship between the two which leads to greater professional development. According to Beale et al. (2019), these mentorship programs help to equip the faculty members with a better understanding of the different types of students they will encounter and how to deal with various issues experienced by said students.

The Academic Development Program is a special program that helps prepare those students who do not meet the currently required qualifications to join colleges but show the potential to succeed in college (Beale et al., 2019). According to the authors, these programs that run for five weeks in the summer, ensuring students develop their mathematics, writing, and reading skills in advance of the academic year. This in turn can improve student scores in college mathematics entry exams which is a common requirement in most colleges. The teaching of culturally relevant course work ensures that the students get a sense of social responsibility (Banks & Dohy, 2019). They learn the significance of using what they learn in class for the service of their community and

this helps in the liberalization of other members of the said community. It also created a sense of self-realization as the students learned about their culture and they could easily relate to the content.

It is not enough for students to just complete their higher education and graduate, they need to be able to compete vigorously in the job market (Palmer & Avery, 2019). HBCUs have identified this great challenge and have come up with mitigation programs like diversification of the languages taught. According to Chun and Evans (2018), the teaching of more foreign languages in college ensures that with the globalization of economies, ensuring that African American students are not left behind. Travel exposes students to more diverse cultures than those present in the U.S. only and helps to widen their views and expands racial understanding. However, the students are not taking full advantage of these opportunities.

Conclusion

The number of discussions on the low enrollment and completion numbers among African American male students is not to perpetuate a deficit narrative, it is merely highlighting the reality that despite three decades of increased scholarly attention on the academic study of African American male students. As researchers and educators interested in African American male student success, the academic community should be more innovative and creative in approaches to improve the educational experience for this student cohort (Travers, 2019). To that end, the primary aim of this study was to offer a conceptual understanding that involves the African American male student college experience for current and future college staff and faculty. Arroyo (2014) emphasized the

contributions that HBCUs have made to aid in the academic success of African American male students, by providing mentoring opportunities for this cohort and other resources that are to be adopted across other college institutions to help in the retention and graduation rates of African American male students.

Implications

HBCUs are crucially important in providing African American students with access to postsecondary opportunities, similarly to PBIs. While this PBI in the Northeast has a steady increase in enrollment rates in recent decades like many PBIs, those rates have not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in graduation rates (Gray & Swinton, 2017). As we continue to examine this growing concern, if this discrepancy is partly due to the insufficient effort exerted by students, policies that aim at rewarding effort explicitly may succeed in increasing graduation rates (Gray & Swinton, 2017).

Summary

In Section 1, the local problem of low African American male student graduation rates at a PBI was described in the context of this investigation. Despite the concerted efforts of increased enrollment at the study location, male students are not graduating at a similar rate to their female counterparts. While many factors impact the graduation rates, an exploration of Tinto's (1975, 1993) institutional model theory could reveal the complex relationships involved on campus. The theory connects an individual student's academic and social experience at a college or university to their ability to persist to graduation. Without first addressing the personal needs of the students such as their level of commitment to personal goals (grades, graduation, and other benchmarks of academic

success), students can struggle to be motivated and persist. Conversely, a student must demonstrate a certain level of institutional commitment, typically evidenced through the social network, school pride, and sense of welcomeness. The combination of personal goals and institutional commitment is what leads ultimately to a student's decision to return to school (Burke, 2019).

Section 2: The Methodology

I examined the graduation rate of successful African American male students at a PBI. The methodology provided opportunity for African American male students at a PBI to express their academic experience through conversations and stories. The participants engaged in meaningful conversations as they were interviewed, providing information pertaining to the college experience of African American male students and the graduation rates of that cohort. I interviewed eight African American male students who recently graduated from a PBI in the northeast United States.

Research Design: Basic Qualitative Research

The term *research* is often synonymous with quantitative methodologies (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), which is often thought to be more precise because quantitative research tends to involve numbers and qualitative research involves words and descriptions. Yet qualitative research, although subjective, is just as rigorous and rewarding. Qualitative research enabled me to study personal experiences and academic-life trajectories with a focus on frameworks such as motivation, opportunities, and outcome. The focus of my investigation into African American male student graduation required insight into the individual's worldview on both a personal and professional level. This insight helped uncover the meaning and individual attributes to their college experience—the way they make sense of it—as related to their own progression in their academics. Other methods considered for this study were case study or phenomenological research; however, due to COVID-19 access to physical data, such as student printed newspapers, was limited due to institutions' transition to distance learning.

Participants

Because I wanted to explore the lives of nine African American male student who graduated from PBI, students who had been in college/university for more than 4 years were given a priority as they would have greater experience on the challenges African American students encounter in their academic journey. The study focused on students who have recently graduated from PBI colleges/universities. I selected PBIs in the northeast United States for accessibility and potential for individual representation. With these three leading PBIs, the potential to have students who met my selection criteria made the data collection process less difficult. With the current COVID-19 protocols and social distancing measures in place, I used the existing institutional database from the identified institutions. The database helped in identifying potential participants. I sought assistance from the research faculties of the identified institution to aid in the recruitment process. Once I identified the potential participants, I contacted participants through electronic means, mostly email, to connect with potential interviewees. I limited my interviewing to phone interviews for social distance and participants' safety. The researcher and participant relationship was established virtually by email, telephone, and Zoom conference video calls. In this type of sampling, participants are selected or sought after based on preselected criteria grounded in the research questions (Benoot et al., 2016).

Data Collection

In keeping with the primary concern of qualitative research, I focused on the meaning of individual African American male student experiences in college/university.

The phenomenon of interest was how African American male students experience a successful completion of their college studies and what they need to successfully complete their studies. Since this is subjective to each individual experience, I used interviews as my main method of data collection. This enabled me to gather participants' insights on their unique college experience. The individual conversations allowed me to explore the social and cultural phenomena that have affected my interviewees' experiences in college/university. One of the most important goals of phenomenological research is to understand participant perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). My interviews include questions surrounding reasons how African American male student college experience have influenced their successful completion of their studies, beginning with easier questions before asking validating and important questions (Berg, 2009). As the interviews progressed, additional questions were asked to enrich the conversation and uncover additional expectations and experiences, improving my data collection.

For interviews, I started with faculty members from the psychology and guidance and counseling departments to practice my question and interview technique with the students. This helped in learning where I need more clarification in questioning as well as knowing where I had duplication in the interview questions. The identification of background information about the participants was then done in the recruitment stage, which is important in verifying the relevance of individuals' participation in the study. I shared with participants the questionnaire, a permission letter from the institutional review board (IRB) to conduct this study, and the consent form. The IRB reviewed the proposed research topic to ensure that the welfare, right, and safety of the participants

would be safeguarded. Individual emails were sent to all the participants with consent form explaining in person, and the participants were required to sign the form as required by IRB. The email outreach contained an invitation for participants to have a phone interview at their convenience.

The data collection process included completing a consent form prior to conducting an over the phone interview for approximately 40 minutes; the entire process took less than 2 hours. The interviews were audio recorded, and a copy of the transcript with the final research results was sent to the participants via a private summary website upon completion of the study. The reports that were generated out of this study did not reveal the identities of individual participants. Details that might identify participants, such as the location of the study, also are not shared. I did not use personal information for any purpose outside of the research project. The participants are identified only by pseudonym, as are the institutions in which they are employed. No descriptive data were provided that would permit someone outside the study to identify any of the interviewees.

Further, data were kept secured by encrypting all interviews and transcripts and securing them with passwords known only to me. Data will be kept for at least 6 years, as required by the university, and then will be deleted or shredded. Collecting these data helped to obtain information about the reasons these students were able to persist. I also gained understanding from the possible resources that are available from the college to help in African American male student success.

Data Collection Instruments

In my research, I used open-ended interview questions about successful student backgrounds and experience and encouraged the respondents to respond candidly. The interview was not limited to the questionnaire as I used follow-up questions with an aim of prompting the respondent on specific topics relevant to their input. To enrich my data, I provided the participants an opportunity to share any additional thoughts about their experiences at the culmination of each interview.

When conducting in-depth interviews, concerns of bias can arise in research (Sarniak, 2015). When constructing the interview questions, I was mindful of the four core types of bias-driven responses from respondents: (a) acquiescence, (b) social desirability, (c) habituation, and (d) sponsor bias (Sarniak, 2015). To minimize bias and ensure accuracy and trustworthiness in my interviews, participants were selected through purposeful sampling focused on individual male students who were college graduates at PBIs within 5 years.

Data Analysis

I collected, consolidated, and coded transcripts prepared from the audio recordings of all individual phone interviews. The qualitative data collected were organized in two ways: first by participant and then by question number and subject. Data analysis procedures entailed examination of both data arrangements. Examination and analysis of data incorporated phenomenological procedures based on Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2013). Initially, data were categorized by participant interview. I read individual transcripts while listening to the interview recording and added observational

comments and corrections to the prepared transcripts. Significant statements collected during participant interviews were highlighted, including descriptive sentences and quotes that provided an understanding of how the participant experienced in the PBI campus setting. The transcripts were reread, and organizational notes added.

According to Moustakas (1994), qualitative data analysis enables the researcher to identify the narrow units of analysis (significant statements), broader units (meaning), and detailed descriptions of *what* the individuals experienced and *how* they experienced it. Analyzing data by individual interview provided an in-depth understanding of each participant's story in this case study. The approach provided a foundation for analysis of the data collected and culminated in an identification of the *essence* of the experience for the individuals interviewed. Ultimately, the data analyzed *what* the interviewees experienced and *how* they experienced it, culminating in an overall essence of the experiences of successful African American male students who persisted and graduated from a PBI college or university.

Next, I analyzed the data with a focus on participants' collective experiences, analyzing words or patterns of thought to reveal commonalities among individuals that articulated factors contributing to the success of African American male students in PBIs. This enabled me to develop a list of significant statements about how participants experienced in PBIs. These significant statements were then grouped into themes, or larger units of information.

In analyzing the responses from the interviews, I found that many of the participants valued community and connection to the school, more specifically through

the affiliation of being an athlete. Other themes that came about were working while in school and the importance of engaging with diverse staff and faculty on their campuses. I used conceptual framework aligned questions to reach saturation from the students who engaged in successful methods while in college to persist to graduation. Data were examined for commonalities in words, phrases, and patterns of thought to determine these themes. Here I made connections and looked for trends in participants' experiences. In doing so, I was able to analyze the data by condensing the information into significant statements or quotes and combining the statements into themes. According to Creswell (2013), this procedure developed a textural description of the experiences (what participants experienced), a structural description of their experiences (how they experienced it), and results in a combination which conveys an overall *essence* of the experience.

Data Analysis Results

Participants that were fully engaged in the college experience alongside having family and peer support often resulted in completing their academic journey successfully. Upon analyzing the data from the interviews that were conducted with 9 participants, we concluded that the participants experience in student organizations, athletics, work study played significant roles in setting academic goals and persisting through to graduation. The problem that was investigated through this study is low African American male student graduation rates at a PBI in the northeastern region of the United States. The participants are asked to explore their experiences as African American male students who persisted to graduation. The themes that came about from the interviews included

four categories: (a) work study opportunities, (b) support from community connections, (c) engagement with diverse faculty and staff, and (d) distraction of financial concerns.

Theme 1: Work Study Opportunities

One significant aspect that leads to successful completion of a degree involves financing the education. For African American male students, this often plays a significant role, and through the interviews found how impactful family presence and financial support mainly from working on campus through work-study, or working off campus, assisted in their academic support. “Participating in work study, student athletics and academic obligations allowed me to stay organized and set goals.” Having the financial security appeared to have lifted a burden from these students to allow them to continue their studies. “, I was fortunate enough to get a work-study assignment as a dorm manager assistant. This job allowed me to work and do my homework at the same time. This was the best design because it allowed me to focus on schoolwork and get paid and not miss a beat.”

Theme 2: Support from Community Connections

Participants were asked to describe how the institution and community impact their perseverance to graduation, one participant responded “The community at my college was family like. While I believe all PBIs deal with administrative struggles the supportive environment and accessibility to administration and faculty makes up for it.” This indicates the value of having a community of supportive individuals can lead to becoming a successful graduate. Another participant went on to explain, “I would say the community had an impact on my perseverance to graduate. I was surrounded by other

individuals who were motivated to matriculate and of course that work ethic rubbed off on me because I did not want to get left behind.” They continued to mention “I did have an advisor for my class who I would reach out to if I felt like I was facing a hurdle that my classmates couldn’t help walk me through. So yes, I would say that I had a great support system amongst the community/class that I was involved with.” Another aspect that derived from the interviews that causes African American male students to persist to graduation, was through the involvement in athletics. Athletics played not only a role while in college, but also was set as a pre-college factor that motivated individuals to attend college. There were no mentions of joining student government, or that being a part of them persisting. “Due to my heavy involvement in athletics, I never got around to student government or being involved in commencement” mentioned one participant. Another stated, “I was able to go on a track scholarship which ended up doing a lot of my goal setting for me because I had no choice but to meet them if I wanted to stay on the team.”

Theme 3: Engagement with Diverse Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff relationship can be instrumental in the academic development of any student. However, with African American male students at PBIs, this relation appears to play a role in aiding in goal setting, and the journey to academic success. In the interviews a participant stated, “My sociology professor was the one that kept the conversations going about graduation. I did set some academic goals for myself in order to rebuild my GPA. I had a lot of conversations with this professor and the underlying theme of our conversations were preparation for the future after college”. Staff can also

be as valuable as faculty in helping African American male students navigate through the rigor of higher education, “my Greek advisor, he was the one that really assisted in setting academic goals with me,” mentioned by one participant, who’s encouragement and support came from their Greek advisor. Another participant continued to reiterate the importance of faculty interaction by mentioning “I would like to say that later in my second semester sophomore year is when I believe I started to develop relationships with faculty and staff. I did have one professor in my social science course who I gravitated to, and they were able to help me stay the course. Our conversations were really informal, and that one professor checked in with me at the start of every semester to ensure that I am on track.”

Theme 4: Distraction of Financial Concerns

Paying for college can be cumbersome for all students, even the student with the means to pay for their education. With the consistency in tuition increase for colleges and universities, college cost often always becomes a distraction for black families. A participant mentioned “I worked for two months during my sophomore year doing telemarketing to pay for school.” Working in college can be helpful to develop time management skills along with acquiring real life work experience can assist in the job market. However, for most African American male students who have to work as means to complete a degree, this can truly affect their academic performance: “Unfortunately, I had to work to survive, as I received extraordinarily little to no financial support from my single mom, which was no fault to her own, she just did not have the means” (Participant 1). This is another example where financial concern can become a distraction. This

participant had to persevere through the financial struggle to obtain the ultimate outcome of a college degree.

The emphasis on financial pressures as a major agent in producing low black graduation rates has always been concerning. However, undoubtedly, it shows through the interviews that a student with the willingness to pursue a degree will utilize the resources around them to continue to push through even as these distractions of financial concerns continue to play a role throughout their academic life.

Evidence of Quality, Accuracy, and Credibility

To support the accuracy and credibility of the study, nine respondents participated in the project study. The integration of member checking or revisiting some of the participants with the final themes and findings to determine their level of connection, belief, or disbelief to the findings supported trustworthiness of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The mixed display of various responses from the data sources created a clear awareness for the reader of the study about the relationship between college and university and African American male students.

Discrepant Cases

Given the request to participate based upon knowledge of the perception held by the students and administrators, all participants had knowledge related to the established research question. The data collection in the interviews illuminated discrepancies between university administrators, including faculty and staff, and African American male students. While all participants agreed that there was a lack of student engagement with administrators, the underlying cause for the lack of engagement illuminated a

discrepancy in the data centered on the impetus for the lack of African American male student engagement.

The PBI did plan to offer various opportunities for African American male students to participate in activities that foster student engagement. The administrators cited a variety of resources within the university such as student acceptance night, town hall forums with faculty, and student government meet and greets. The staff shared that some of those events are often better attended if the students are excited to come to the university. The staff noted that most of the time it is generally a “disappoint” as far as the amount of African American male students that attend. Discrepant cases within the review of the noted data sources were held as an indication of truth in the research providing an opportunity to demonstrate potential limitations or areas in need of further study in future work (Booth et al., 2013).

Summary

The data collected in the project study provided for in-depth exploration of the PBI and the graduation rate of African American male students from the perspective of African American male who successfully graduated from a PBI. The current perception of these participants was well documented in 4 categories throughout the findings. The interview protocol was mirrored for each participant. The way the interviews were conducted and formatted created an expansive comparison of perspective of each identified question and rich analysis of the data in relation to the research question.

The problem which prompted this project study was limited to African American male student engagement with university administrators and leaders. Key findings

included the challenges of financial concerns, of making supportive connections, and of being engaged with university life. Goal setting and pursuing a graduation agenda were supported by interacting regularly with diverse faculty and staff, by having work study positions, and by participating in athletics and student organizations. Moments of individual connection and support from staff and faculty members helped students pursue academic goals. The project constructed to address the gaps is a 3-day professional development curriculum. Professional development is necessary to ensure all members of campus are focused on the orientation of First Year students and their families to support retention through graduation.

Project Deliverable

Gathering all the information from the participants has led to constructing a project that would be influential in aiding students to better understand how to navigate through college. This project will allow faculty and staff to be at the forefront during orientation or invocation to meet and greet students. This will allow for students prior to their first day or class to have already met some faculty and staff and can reach out to them as they begin going through their academic journey. This project will also include the delivery of crucial information, such as, understanding different departments, the value of student government, understanding how to enroll in work-study or obtaining on and off campus employment, and information on athletics. The last component of this project will include the family support aspect. It would involve orienting the family to the college or university to have them understand the experiences that can lead to their

child's success, while emphasizing the importance of family support. Academic agenda and goal setting can and should occur across campus and in multiple settings.

Section 3: The Project

Based on the findings of my research, African American male students at PBIs articulated the importance of working while in school, and they had less support in the areas of support from community connections, engagement with diverse faculty and staff, and distraction of financial concerns. Although participants stated that the goal for them was to graduate college and obtain a degree, many of them did not take full advantage of the college experience. These data could be shared with incoming first year students and returning students to help them understand that the college experience at a PBI includes more to it than being a working student.

From the findings, a professional development project was created to help better gather the necessary information that led to successful completion of a college degree of an African American male student at a PBI. The professional development project can aid staff and faculty in student orientation, student convocation, and other student support services to align to the supports articulated by the participants in the study. The professional development can be made available to all incoming students and led by faculty and staff as well as successful students (who have all have direct involvement with student orientation). My study may contribute to positive social change in the field of education by illustrating the importance of (a) work study opportunities, (b) support from community connections, (c) engaging with diverse faculty and staff, and (d) distraction of financial concerns.

Rationale

In the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that the Board of Education should expand access to public schools for the minority and dismantle segregated public schools. The ruling was made to allow more African Americans to access quality education and have equal opportunities like their European American counterparts. However, half a century later, the number of African American males graduating rate from colleges and higher learning institutions is low compared to other ethnic groups. According to U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division (2016), African American represents 13.3% of the American population, but only 10%, 12%, and 7% earn an undergraduate degree, graduate degree, and doctoral degree, respectively. In addition, African American males lead at an unemployment rate of 6.7% for males aged 16 years and above, followed by Hispanic American males at 4.1%, Asian American males at 3.0%, and European American males at 3.2%.

I created a professional development plan for my project because African American male students, staff, and faculty seem to have a disconnect when it comes to understanding how to successfully navigate a relationship with each other to increase engagement and foster success for African American male students. Professional development could provide staff and faculty with a better understanding of how to connect with African American male students and develop programs that could enhance the student college experience. Multiple institutions have created Black male centered programs as an intervention method to support African American male students' academic success, academic and social integration, and personal development (Brooms,

2016). Because the goal of the professional development is to help African American students persist to graduation and set goals, and due to COVID-19 restrictions, I chose to develop a hybrid professional development format.

Review of Literature

To help support the goal of this study, which is helping African American male students set goals and persist to graduation, I incorporated best practices from the literature. Much of the literature reviewed in the field is framed from a deficit model where barriers to success are the focus, with failure attributed to the individual rather than other factors (Clark & Orrock, 2018). The centrality of faculty and staff competence to student outcomes has been highlighted repeatedly in recent literature, and one corollary of this argument has been that enhancing faculty and staff engagement quality is key to improving the quality of an educational system more generally (Borg, 2018). Professional development is a key strategy for faculty and staff improvement and includes any activity which is designed to bring about positive changes in student engagement. Professional development can take many forms, from informal, brief, and individual activities, such as reading professional articles to participation in larger-scale and extended development projects organized by institutions and organizations (Borg, 2018).

This study contributed to the field by shifting the focus from failures experienced by African American males in higher education toward understanding their strength and successes. One development that came out of this study was the importance of strength-based advising. Strength-based advising are approaches based on the belief that individuals achieve greater outcomes when they discover and develop their natural talents

instead of solely mitigating their areas of weakness (Soria et al., 2017). The strength-based approach facilitates advising relationships, thereby supporting student engagement, retention, and graduation and enhancing students' self-awareness and confidence (Soria et al., 2017).

For the review of literature, I focused on (a) importance of work study opportunities, (b) support from community connections, (c) engagement with diverse faculty and staff, and (d) distraction of financial concerns. Using Education Source and Education Resource Information Center databases, I searched for scholarly resources using key terms including, *achievement gap*, *barriers*, *college transition*, *faculty engagement*, *staff engagement*, *work study*, and *student involvement*. These peer-reviewed sources provided me with information about the African American male student college experience at PBIs. The review of literature in the first section provides information to help better understand the direction for the project study. In that review, I focused on the elements of community and connection along with college transitions, student support services, and student involvement.

Achievement of African American Males in Higher Education

Though the U.S. Department of Education takes pride in the development of higher education and academics for all students, African American male students continue to lag behind (Adams-King, 2016). Though this gap cannot be characterized as a crisis (Stout et al., 2018), it need to be addressed. However, regardless of the gap, there have been many strides made by African American male students who have persisted to graduation. But intervention measures must be comprehensive in addressing the

multiplicity of students' needs such as addressing inappropriate behaviors, which may be caused by family issues, illness, mental health, negligence, abuse, and academic standing (Thelamour et al., 2019). Though the behavior manifests as disciplinary issues, they directly affect the students' performance. My project addressed these issues by implementing a support structure that includes strategies that address discipline, mental health, and family involvement. As one participant stated, "I graduated in 4 years. Reason being is that I had great family support." This encouraged me to include a family support section in the 3-day professional development project.

In addition, peer pressure has significantly contributed to the gap achievement among African American male students. There is a perception among the peers that African American males are to excel in sports but not in education contributes to the underachievement in the academic and otherwise (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2019). Although excelling in sports seems to be the most frequent aspect of why African American males enter college, it plays a significant role in aiding in the persistence. Athletics provide an aspect of discipline that can be a direct correlation to academic success, which one participant indicated: "I contribute my success to the discipline I obtained as a track athlete."

Prevalence of Barriers

Many studies discuss factors that contribute to the academic failure of African American males. It is vital to understand, from a systematic perspective, where African American males from PBI setting experience struggles and barriers that affect their achievement and how to combat them. Numerous factors contribute to academic failure

for African American male students at PBIs including single-parent family system, socioeconomic status, perceptions of masculinity, and lack of multicultural awareness (Clark & Orrock, 2018). Specifically, there are internal and external barriers that limit African American male students from achieving a college degree (Grant, 2019). Internal barriers consist of ethnic identity, stereotype threats, and achievement motivation. The external barriers include structural racism, institutional racism, and critical race theory. Systematic racism is a risk factor to the success of African American male students with a lasting impact on their lives. Discrimination and racial hostility subjected by many African American male students deny their educational progress (Goldsmith, 2020). Institutions have taken into consideration the impact of systemic racism, which is why HBCUs have structural characteristics that are believed to have indirect rather than direct influences on students.

Structural characteristics that help in the success of African American male students are smaller classrooms that have a smaller faculty-student ratio that could promote engagement with faculty (McKie, 2020). One participant stated, “I never ever contemplated dropping out. The institution provided advisors and department counselors to assist with guidance and advice with our academic goals.” This showcases how the institution provided the necessary resource that got them through graduation. The development of seamless and high-quality education is a necessity from early childhood through to secondary education for success in college education (Goldsmith, 2020). Another participant was able to utilize the resources to help overcome the institutional barriers:

It took me 6 years to graduate, I did not graduate in the traditional 4 years. My dedication and passion to learn led me to graduate. I took advantage of study groups which made a huge impact on my grades, every week was a group session being led. I had a set term to graduate, and I made it happen by leading by example. I was not able to graduate in the term I set but my experience was awesome. The campus tutor was a life saver from me for one class I struggled in, but I made it through.

The participant also mentioned a campus tutor as a significant resource to their persistence. Another participant alluded to family as the reason for accomplishing their set goal to become a college graduate: “It took me 4 years to graduate. My family was my biggest motivation when times got hard.” This emphasizes the importance of family support, which does not necessarily have to come from a traditional family structure.

Students who are early engaged in the social context of campus life are also more likely to persist toward graduation (Clarke & Orrock, 2018). This is referred to as agents of socialization, which refers to the interaction students have with their peers and faculty. One participant was able to engage with a faculty member while in college that was overly concerned about her students knowing the material that was being taught and encouraged discipline by creating a no-excuse environment:

Once in the business program you had no choice but to succeed. The head of the department was [Dr. Frazier]. At the time she was the [CFO of Wachovia Bank] and demanded you to interact in a certain way. You had to come dressed for success for every class. She would mark you absent if you did not. As well, she did not take subpar work. If

and assignment you submitted was wrong, she made you do extra credit. This wasn't for a better grade; this was to make sure you were competent. She wanted us to have no excuse of not succeeding once we left college.

Another participant mentioned,

I would not have graduated without my study groups. My class thrived off teamwork. We had a study group every single day after class to prepare for the exam the next day (we had daily exams during the summer semester). Our study groups were always supportive and usually involved games, snacks, competitions, wagers, and anything else we could come up with to glue the information into our memories. Most of the time, our entire study group achieved the grades we desired.

The importance of the peer interaction and how much of positive difference that made in their college experience. Students who feel a sense of community are able to feel confident in the fact that they can make valuable contributions to improve student life.

College Environment and Transition

College environment refers to the actual experience that the student undergoes in college and university campuses during their educational program, which involves all students' experiences during their program that affects their college experience (Goldsmith, 2020). Students who interact with people who are worthwhile in their higher education environment are likely to participate in educationally purposeful activities during college, persist, and attain their educational goals. Students belonging to an affinity group, engaging in activities requiring daily decisions and tasks, and having meaningful interaction with faculty members or staff are likely to be more likely to be

committed to their studies and college (Campbell et al., 2019). One of the participants in this study mentioned,

I built great relationships with some of my professors and some of the staff workers like security and the café workers. The professors helped me in the tough transition of the rigorous demands of a university compared to high school.

Campus environment also entails the assurance that diversity in the broadest sense is part of the institution's fabric. Diversity among staff, faculty, and student bodies is vital for an institution to fulfill their primary obligation, providing quality education and making a significant contribution to national and global economies (Goldsmith, 2020).

One participant noted,

My first year was very crucial, I had to build relationships by attending a lot of study groups in which I received a great deal of help from staff in order for me to be successful in my classes along with what made prosperous throughout my college experience. I gravitated towards one teacher who was very patient and lead me down the right path in order for me to stay focus in order for me to pass my class.

This is a direct reflection on how PBIs are putting together resources to encourage staff and faculty diversity to assist in the engagement with students in their first year's college transition.

Support from Community Connections

The African American male student athlete is lauded for his sport performance but is often viewed as problematic in the broader academic society. They are recruited as

student athletes, but they soon realize that the demand of their athletic commitment renders them athlete students (Harrison et al., 2017). In my study I noted that this is a consequence of some deficit models of the African American student athlete, and participants provided an alternative view of the issues faced by African American male athletes. There is an alternative outlook that connects engagement in athletics and college completion. One participant described that being an athlete played a major role in keeping him on track and persisting through graduation:

While I was not fortunate enough to afford college without assistance, I still felt like I was expected/obligated to go because that is how my high school prepared me. I was able to go on a track scholarship which ended up doing a lot of my goal setting for me because I had no choice but to meet them if I wanted to stay on the team.

Aside from athletics, student organizations such as student clubs and student government play significant roles in helping students acclimate and persist to graduation. Institutions of higher education have a long tradition of affording opportunities for student participation in governance (Nevin, 2017). These opportunities are based on two primary purposes. The first, which is the origin for student participation in governance, is to provide students a role within the overall governance system (Nevin, 2017). The second purpose is to promote students' learning through involvement in and administration of student activities. Although student governance occurs through involvement in institutional governing boards, it more extensively occurs through campus student government associations (Nevin, 2017).

Student Governance

Student Government Associations are campus organizations comprised of student leaders which advocate on behalf of the student population. Participation in these associations have proven academic, professional, and social benefits. Yet the engagement in the organization has declined (Patel, 2020). “As far as Student Government, I found out pretty quickly that was not for me. I stayed close to my lane which was sports,” stated a participant who willingly chose to avoid student government, another participant mentioned, “Unfortunately, I did not participate in student government or graduation. Athletics took a large chunk of my time in college, and I did not see the importance or the value of joining student government while in college.”

From these interviews I found it crucial to separate the athletics and student government and to highlight student government to incoming students through their orientation process. “Once I got to campus, I did look to join an organization, and in my second semester of my freshmen year I joined a Greek Letter Organization. However, I never was attracted to student government, I barely saw them or understood what they did on or for the campus.” This participant expresses their lack of interest in student government even after joining a Greek Lettered Organization. By including student government in the orientation process, it may create more traction to student government associations and therefore increasing participation.

Work Study Opportunities

Working while in school also poses a challenge for all students, and at times can hinder African American male students to complete their degrees in universities and

colleges, however, this study shows an encouraging aspect of working while in college and how it was difficult, but it allowed them to achieve academic success. “I did participate in work study, and I found it to be very important to my survival through those four years. Participating in work study, student athletics and academic obligations allowed me to stay organized and set goals.” Goings et al. (2018) argued that as of 2015, 32% of Black male students had to balance work and school. A misconception is that these conflicting engagements of the Black male students have negative impacts on them causing them to lose focus in their academic work and less retention in higher institutions, however, one participant stated, “Because I was on partial scholarship, I was fortunate enough to get a work-study assignment as a dorm manager assistant. This job allowed me to work and do my homework at the same time. This was the best design because it allowed me to focus on schoolwork and get paid and not miss a beat,” showing that obtaining a job while in school was actually beneficial to his studies.

Research in a College Board report found that most of the male students of color are the first group in their families to join colleges and universities (Hall, 2017). For this reason, they are viewed as the role models of their families. As a result, these students would end up having to work while in school because of the lack of financial assistance coming from their respective homes, one participant stated “While I had an athletic scholarship, it was not enough to support my college needs. Unfortunately, I had to work to survive, as I received extraordinarily little to no financial support from my single mom, which was no fault to her own. She just did not have the means.”

Further, for these families where the African American male students are the role models in terms of attaining higher educations, and in the process showcasing a great sense of responsibility, as explained in this case by another participant “While in college I did not participate in work-study, however I did have a job. The reason for me working was that my parents wanted me to have some sense of responsibility. My parents were very helpful in helping me throughout college.” Although their parents were very active in their schooling, they still encouraged them to get a job in order to develop a sense of responsibility in adulthood.

Statistics may show that African American male students drop out of school to help their families financially; however, what these statistics fail to highlight are the students who overcome this obstacle and persist to graduation, as seen here by one participant “I had always had the vision and intention to graduate from college, however, at one point work and sports severely affected my GPA and as a result delayed my graduation time period.” Although this participant faced some struggles juggling work, sports and schoolwork, they managed to stay on track reaching their goal in achieving their college degree.

According to Sáenz et al. (2018), 43% of students at the community college were Black male students in 2015. A study was conducted in North Carolina community college and it was found out that of 55,013 students who enrolled in the college in 2016, 9 % of them were African American male students (Sáenz et al., 2018). These students were involved in part-time work while in school.

Alston et al. (2017) mentioned that the issue of financial concerns for the male students of color in the U.S is closely related to these students working while in school. Johnson and McGowan (2017) argue that African American students experience pressure with the rising cost of higher education. It becomes difficult to pay because many higher learning institutions increase their tuition yearly. For this reason, the students coming from low-income families have to balance school and work for them to get enough money to pay for their college fees.

A government-supported program known as the TRiO program has been beneficial to the African American male students in PBIs (Moss, 2019). In terms of assisting students who have to balance work and school, this initiative has provided funds for the low-income students and helped the first-generation students who are viewed as the providers of their low-income families. This resource is one that I found to be very informative and included it in my study have that information disseminated to students, particular African American male students during their first year in college, through the orientation.

Engagement with Diverse Faculty and Staff

The university faculty that comprises of different lecturers and professors who are either directly or indirectly involved in contributing or managing the welfare of the students has a significant impact on the students' success. According to Thelamour et al. (2019), the faculty–student interactions have a significant impact and influence on the faculty-student experience and perception of their university. Therefore, supportive faculty interactions guarantee the minority student's social security of being socially

accepted and academically approved. However, the culture of the faculty varies in different universities, as well as their relationship with the students or a specific group of students.

For African American male students to succeed in their careers, the university staff need to understand and address the motivations, interests, and goals of the minority students (Browne, 2018). With that said, I found through my study that many African American male students do not take full advantage of faculty and staff engagement “My relationship with faculty and staff was very minimal. I did not gravitate to any one particular individual for guidance. I realized in college that I was the master of my own fate; I saw that there was a direct link between the efforts I put in and the result I received.” For this purpose, I recommended increased faculty and staff engagement in my project and built-in opportunities to have guest lecturers that hold faculty and staff positions at universities to speak to African American male students during their first-year orientation. The academic life cycle of students revolves mainly around the faculty members, and this shows the impact that a diverse and engaged administration and staff dedicated to the success of the students through academic feedback on their assignments and a constant update of reports on their course grades and scores within a semester.

Karpouza and Emvalotis (2019) studied four different universities in the United States and concluded that a diverse faculty in a learning institution correlates to a higher number of graduates from minority groups. Higher education stakeholders could enhance faculty diversity according to the diversity of the students to allow the minority groups to feel presented or be able to seek help from the faculty members they are free to consult or

seek guidance from. Legette (2018) found out that the relationship between faculty members and the black male students helps them in feeling empowered to learn, academic validation, and interpersonal validation that in many ways determines the academic success of the minority group of the students.

Representation matters, and the literature reveals an interrelationship between the diversity of the university faculty and that of the students in determining the campus climate, which is an essential factor that determines the black male student's academic and overall achievement, including retention and graduation rate (Trussel & Burke-Smalley, 2018). In a study where the person-environment (PE) model was used to determine the impact of the university faculty on the success of the minority students. Broom (2018) found that the success of many university minority students is a function of the fit between their personality type and their learning environment which is mainly characterized by the faculty welfare.

Distraction of Financial Concerns

Under any circumstances, a college education cost huge amounts of money. Not only are there very large outlays for tuition, books, and travel, but, even more important, going to college takes a student out of the work force for four or more years (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2021). The total bit into family income and wealth can amount to \$160,000 or more per student (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2021).

High and always increasing college costs tend to produce much greater hardships for black families. The availability of a high level of financial aid shields low-income

black students from financial pressures that may force minority students to leave college to fulfill family obligations and financial responsibilities (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2021). Deep financial pockets enable some schools to provide greater financial aid than others, and this is a major factor in student graduation rates.

Project Description

My study revealed various supports and barriers described by successful African American students for setting an academic agenda and goal setting to ensure students are involved in goal setting. For the student in my study the following themes were identified: (a) importance of work study opportunities, (b) support from community connections, (c) engagement with diverse faculty and staff, and (d) distraction of financial concerns. The insights have resulted in actions and activities for a 3-day professional development directed at three audiences.

The primary audience for the professional development opportunity is college officials (faculty, administration, and staff) and any stakeholder who is involved in first year orientation activities. Any campus employee could benefit from the professional development. Academic agenda and goal setting can and should occur across campus and in multiple settings. The project contains the professional development necessary to ensure all members of campus are focused on the orientation of First Year students and their families to support retention through graduation. Below is a description of how this orientation could be executed and what resources would need to be used to measure learning outcomes.

Table 1*Sample Daily Agenda*

Days	Description of Day
Day 1: The welcome (3hrs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensuring belongingness on campus. Welcomeness has been tied to student persistence. When students can “see” themselves as part of the campus community, it creates the setting where academic agendas and goal setting become more common place and the essential elements of college life are all demystified for students. Building a shared vocabulary and empowering all members of the campus to participate in the welcoming of new students to campus involves a central concept. In my study, the deck of cards containing all the offices, school departments, and campus resources could help all students, faculty, and staff engage around the process of full orientation. The immersive experience invites the entire campus to play a role in helping students set an academic agenda with clearly stated goals for graduation. This kick off on day one consist of best practices for welcoming all First-Year students. All incoming students will have the opportunity to meet administrative staff, second year students, and faculty via a panel introduction. Panel will consist of (2 faculty, 2 staff, 2 current students). All First-Year students will be given a deck of cards (See card description below). Students will be asked to familiarize themselves with the deck of card by getting into groups of 6-8 students (groups may increase up to 10 students depending on orientation size). Students will play the card game in 2-teams and acquire 2-points per correct answer. The team to reach 100 points first will win the game and will receive SWAG items from the university, the game should be played for a minimum of 45 minutes and a maximum of 75 minutes depending on size of orientation class. After the game is played, students will come together for the conclusion of the day. In their cohorts, students will have the opportunity to present a “carnation” to the individual who made them feel the most welcome on the first day. Prior to the closing remarks the winners of the game will be announced and presented with university embossed SWAG items. Pending budgetary considerations, closing remarks should be done by a guest speaker (Vice President of Student Affairs would be an ideal candidate for Day 1). End of the day will involve a picnic, live music, sponsored by student government with supplemental information about how students can get involved with clubs, support athletic teams, and get an on-campus work study job or internship.
Day 2: The scavenger hunt (3hrs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Day 2 will consist of a brief welcome to provide guidance on the goals and objectives of setting an academic agenda. To start, a student will describe how setting goals for academics improved his or her first year experience. The student cohorts will be cofacilitated by school officials. This day will have student cohort campus wide scavenger hunt. Students will be paired by program of study into groups of two. In the 90 minutes allotted, students will attempt to complete the “hunt” for each office on campus. Library, disability services, the bursar, financial aid, and the campus clinic will all be included. Individual dorms will also be included in the deck of cards that were used on Day-1. The campus card deck consists of vital information that pertains to the university and being a successful college student. With every stop on the scavenger hunt, students must interact with a faculty, and staff to collect a sticker. The pairs of first year students will use their deck of cards to find specific departments on the campus. Representatives from the Bursar’s Office, The Registrar’s Office, The Office of Student with Disabilities, Academic departments will be prepared to ask the students one question: “How can I help you succeed this year?” The Scavenger hunt should last no longer than 90 minutes, regardless of orientation size. Once the 90 minutes are up, students are to return back to the main area where orientation is being held. Each location on the scavenger hunt will provide students a stamp or sticker to complete a campus gameboard. Once all students return, they should be greeted with a Guest Speaker (in this case for Day-2 the Guest Speaker should be a notable alum). The speaker will speak on their first-year experiences, academic agenda creation, goal setting, and the supports that contributed to their success at the institution. Lunch should be served, and orientation concluded.

(table continues)

Days	Description of Day
Day 3: Meet the families (3hrs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Day 3 will acknowledge and celebrate family and community involvement. The focus will shift to the parents, guardians, community members, and school officials of the students. Day three will focus on how to help first year students by focusing on the community who helped get students to this point in their academic careers. • The parents will be invited on campus for an opportunity to meet faculty, staff, and will be provided first year student led tours of the campus. • Upon arrival, community members and parents will be greeted and escorted to the area where orientation will be held, by student leaders. • Once parents arrive to the location, A welcome should occur by either the University president, and/or University provost and a selected student who can speak to the challenges ahead and how fostering a sense of community can help a student persist in his or her studies. • A panel of 2 faculty, 2 staff, and 1 current student will be made available after the welcome, for parents to learn more about the university. The panel should be moderated by the Orientation leader or the Vice president of student affairs. • After the panel discussion, parents, guardians, and families will be escorted in groups (between 6-10 groups-depending on orientation size), to be provided with a campus tour of the campus by first year students. Prior to the tour the parents, guardians, and families will be provided with their own set of cards to use as a guide as they are introduced to the different departments on their tours.

Card Game: A Survival Guide for First-Year Students

From the information that was gathered from the participants in my study, goal setting and having an academic agenda were essential elements for success. In the interviews that I conducted, the African American Male students described a strong value of family, peers, and interaction with faculty and staff. Successful students reported that athletics was a vital source of motivation in their persistence to graduation. A majority of successful students lacked crucial knowledge of the institutional environment due to lack of information at orientation.

The gap in information about which department provided which services encouraged me to develop a card game, which will be served as a guide for First-Year students. The card game will provide questions about topics related to departments, faculty, staff, and student government. The game will be played in a format similar to taboo. It will consist of 2 teams with their respective deck of cards, one person will be holding the card and facing their teammates and will ask the question that is on the card,

the participating teammates will then attempt to answer the question that is asked, within 60 seconds, the objective is to get as many cards answered as possible within that time. For every correct answer, the team will receive 2 points. The team to reach 100 points will win the game. Below is a sample of how the cards will look like. Colleges and Universities can customize the cards with their respect school colors and logo as they like.

Project Evaluation Plan

The project deliverable will be evaluated via formative feedback for incoming first year students. Formative feedback will be collected via discussions with the participating incoming students during the events as well as through the implementation of an anonymous 4-question survey to all participants that will be provided at the end of the 3-day orientation.

Formative Feedback

Throughout the 3-day orientation, all participants in attendance at the events will be requested to provide an email address – most likely the email address provided by the university or preferred email address – at the point of sign in to be utilized in collecting formative feedback via anonymous survey. The survey will request participants to rate the event on 1–5-star scale with 5 stars being the highest ranking and one being the lowest. An open-ended text box will also be provided for the participants to offer suggestions, share their thoughts, and express their feelings about the event attended. This four-question survey will be sent out to all participants after the conclusion of the orientation.

The collected data will be shared at the debriefing meetings with the vice president of student services, director of admissions, and the provost. With each meeting, the administrators will serve as litmus test for continuing orientation events in terms of how the events should be designed prior to implementation. An important aspect of the process is the debriefing and planning meetings which are to occur before and after each orientation. All administrators will have the opportunity to volunteer to serve on the planning team for the orientation.

Justification of Evaluation Type

The iterative process of program implementation, debriefing of events, planning for upcoming events, and communicating with stakeholders and administrators will allow for the orientation to responsive to the needs of the incoming first year students and developing a trusting relationship with the university and its personnel. The orientation plans will utilize formative discussion and survey data to inform the success or failure of the orientation event. The orientation plan will rely upon the debriefing and planning meetings regarding student outcomes as part of the critical feedback loop that is utilized to increase student involvement and engagement throughout their academic life at the university.

Overall Goal of the Project

The overall goal of the project is to increase student engagement throughout their academic life at the university to help with persistence and retention which will lead to higher graduation numbers for African American male students. The formative analysis project evaluation design is being utilized to capture the most authentic feedback on the

project with the intention of reinvesting that knowledge and feedback into the future design of conducting orientation for incoming first year students. The total number of participants at the orientation will provide some data on the level of success at each yearly orientation event.

The data on involvement will be reviewed at each planning and debriefing meeting. All administrators involved in the project will be provided with the data on attendance of current orientation events as well as comparison data from previously held traditional orientation events. The data collected will be utilized to plan for the following orientation, as orientation is to be held every fall and spring semesters. Areas of weakness will be restructured to better meet the needs of all incoming first year students. Areas of strength will be identified and will be implemented in the following orientation as well. Feedback offered in the open ended questions will be utilized to develop the revised methods of supporting student involvement through the academic year.

Project Implication

With increased attention being paid to the success of African American male students in higher education settings, the narrative for academic success for African American male students is changing for the better. Exploring success factors and increasing the academic conversation to highlight the successes of African American male students may eventually lead to positive social change in the field of education. Showcasing these successes has a large impact even in their lives after college and universities because it leads to more recruitment of male students of color, because those

that have successfully went through the process of obtaining a college degree can certainly speak on it, and influence others who have such goals.

Various studies have been conducted using a deficit model, where the focus has been on disparities in African American male student achievement. These investigations are anchored in negative assumptions about the students' ability. While African American male students continue to have the lowest graduation rates in PBIs, consulting with successful African American male students can help to focus on the elements of academic interaction that lead to student success. Successful African American male student performance in HBCU settings are the ideal experts to speak about the successful strategies, approaches, and initiatives that supported their academic success including (a) work study opportunities, (b) support from community connections, (c) engagement with diverse faculty and staff, and (d) distraction of financial concerns. In contrast, the African American male student graduation rate can steadily increase if the correct interventions are placed in predominantly Black colleges and universities. These interventions have to include the support of all stakeholders of the institution to help carry out the message of persevering through graduation.

Section 4: Reflections and conclusion

Discussion of the Project

To create a more equitable learning environment, barriers to student engagement must be examined, and there must be intentional action to foster increased engagement through mutual collaboration between student and institution. The project deliverable includes instructions for positive change at the college level as well as a concise profile of the local problem and a summary of research related to increasing student engagement and goal setting to help bolster the completion rate of African American male students. Major evidence from both the research and the literature are detailed in the findings and review of literature.

Project Strengths

The strength of the project deliverable is its accessibility to the participants. The project deliverable can be presented at the university leadership level and be immediately implemented. The project also directly addresses identified needs for incoming first year students as evidenced by research with focus on work study opportunities, support from community connections, engagement with diverse faculty and staff, and distraction of financial concerns. Additionally, results are based on extensive research and resources. The project deliverable also includes succinct and simple to follow steps to make significant revisions to existing policies on student orientation. With a brief outline of the full project study, the goal is for a reader to grasp the entirety of issues and solutions in a short time span. The integration of Table 1 provides easy to read lists of actions that clarify the steps that can be taken each day to conduct a successful 3-day orientation.

Limitations of the Project

A limitation of this project is reliance on the university administrators to maintain the project over time. Effecting long-term change in a system requires consistent attention to increase the student engagement that leads to academic success and completion of degree for African American male students. If the project is implemented sporadically or without identified planning, meeting, and debriefing structures, results could be limited without clear data in terms of effectiveness.

Another limitation is lack of time provided in the project for administrators to be part of this work. The vice president of student services or student affairs will review the entire project study including the literature review. But other members of the university leadership team may not have the required time to thoroughly review such a document that addresses critical needs of incoming first year students. It would be optimal for administrators who are involved in orientation planning to develop working subcommittees to meet monthly during normal business hours. The subcommittees can be the ones to identify resources that will be needed to complete the orientation.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

An alternative approach to address the problem of the study would be to highlight the importance of student engagement at the start of a student's college career. If increasing completion rate for African American male students is essential to institutional success, then student participants should be given the necessary resource at the start of their college journey when they are still unaware of the expectations of college. To facilitate this work, universities would identify the most vital resources that allow for

academic success and completion, and these resources will be presented at orientation for students to acclimate themselves with those resources. The subcommittee members can be the ones in charge of identify those vital resources. This strategy would move highlight the importance of student engagement.

Another alternative approach would be for universities to create a new position: orientation coordinator. Orientation often becomes an added responsibility for the already busy vice president of student services or student affairs. By identifying funds and hiring a person to solely address barriers and create innovative opportunities to engage students at the start of their college career, universities can increase student engagement and help with persisting to college completion. This will increase the completion rate for all students include African American male students. Providing information on joining student clubs and student government are examples of alternative options for student engagement.

Alternative Definition of the Problem

Increasing the college graduation rate of African American male students is a challenge, as literature has provided many ways through a variety of lenses on how to tackle this subject. Research on increasing graduation rates of African American male students at a PBI, which prompted the project study, was limited and focused on quantitative perspectives that counted the percentage of African American male graduates. But persisting through college and graduating cannot be judged by the number of graduating students. Many incoming first year students have never entered inside a college or university building yet are asked to navigate these institutions with little

assistance. The issue in part due to traditional expectations of colleges and universities that a student has to come in college ready, which by definition can be interpreted differently by different university leaders.

A new paradigm for increasing graduation rate for African American male students could involve the university going to the community to teach students college readiness as opposed to the community going to the school ill prepared. The university could show up where high school students already are engaging with college advisors and community-based organizations that help to provide college scholarships. Events such as college fairs, community weekend festivals, youth programs with police athletic leagues, and other events can draw a large crowd of high school students who are looking to go to college. If colleges and universities are committed to building relationships with high school students, it can start by examining how high schools are teaching students about college expectations and college readiness and then moving beyond the idea that identifies students as not being college ready. Perhaps with those efforts a new and more fruitful definition of college readiness is one in which the colleges and universities train the college advisors on survival techniques for outgoing high school seniors.

Alternative Solution to the Local Problem

An alternate solution to the problem would begin by examining the way the problem was conceived. A strategic planning experience occurred and invited various leadership at a PBI to come together to share perspective and make suggestions about how to increase the graduation rate of African American male student cohort. A series of meetings were held, and basic tenets were established. This work was authentic and

guided by mutual respect of all leadership team. A plan was conceived and weighted with values from the student body.

This is the real involvement of students when they are valued, listened to, and provided a seat at the decision-making table. If we are to expect African American male students to persist to graduation at a higher rate, then this seat at the table must always remain available for students that fit under that cohort to fill. Too often, and as was the case in the research from the PBI, that seat becomes filled by an influential few who have the time or inclination to be part of the committee that overlooks student engagement. The seat could just as easily be filled by others, but barriers tend to form and leave many African American male students without an invitation to the table.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

Throughout this doctoral process, I learned a tremendous amount regarding the way in which current literature can be harnessed to drive best practices within a college or university setting when it comes to increasing the graduation rate of African American male students. The amount of information available via the internet is daunting, and it can be difficult to deduce research and fact from opinion and hearsay. Also, it can be difficult to find research that isn't representative of the deficit model when it comes to African American male student success. The work that I have been engaged in throughout this doctoral process has caused me to develop a newfound sensibility to determine with ease the credibility and validity of an article. It has afforded me with a new lens with which to view the world as a discerning researcher.

This knowledge is powerful and can be leveraged for good in our local communities. Being able to list problems is simple and does not require any specialized learning or awareness. We are living in a time of when social media provides a platform for people to share their grievances and successes about all aspects of life, education and school included. While formulating a litany of issues is easy, solving those problems is where the challenge begins. The field of higher education is facing so many significant issues including inequity based on race, socioeconomics, and gender. Concerns about achievement gaps and equal access to high quality educational programs abound while budgets and staffing are reduced. It is a time of doing more with less in an increasingly diverse society, and knowledge is the key to balance this equation for the betterment of not only our African American male students, but all students.

There is a wealth of knowledge to stand upon as we traverse the tenuous landscape of education and push for positive social change. Colleges and Universities are microcosms of the larger world around us. There are historical reference points that give us an awareness of what has been in place traditionally, and then there is a vast body of research and knowledge available with quick search of the internet that allows me to innovate and expand opportunities for those in need of that opportunity.

The component that must be in place to leverage the array of resources available is the ability to find relevant based, peer reviewed articles to ground the work of innovation and renewal of our field. The research will not eliminate the challenges that we face, but the research will generate deeper awareness of existing solutions. Additionally, a body of research on a topic of importance within a college or university

can be the catalyst for the efforts in creating social change and fostering opportunities to enlighten the practices creating the issues at the local level.

As an educator, I have had the experience of working on solutions to challenge problems throughout my career. My refined awareness of leaning on research when addressing challenges has proven indispensable. There is confidence in being able to read through voluminous reports to determine the value of such research to a local issue. The work of the doctorate has afforded me the greatest training I have ever had on creating a bridge between what has come before, what is being done presently, and what is possible in the future. Assessing research with a targeted focus will amplify the potency of the solutions that can be offered to creating the greatest positive social change for our African American male students.

The experience of completing this doctoral process and associated project deliverable has been highly rewarding. This work will support and ensure the academic success of African American male students in higher education. Being able to positively grow as an educator is valuable but being able to turnkey that growth into an actionable guide for someone else extends the influence and broadens the reach of that good work. Further, learning how to craft a project study and then distilling it to a manageable document that rests on the research and literature is a skill that will forever add value to the work that I am able to do to support the success of African American male students at a PBI.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

The positive social change is aligned to the strategic planning goal of utilizing student engagement at the start of the student's college career to increase graduation rates of African American male students. This work mobilizes the administrators and university leadership as an active part of the solution. Empowering people within a system to generate authentic experiences provides a clear pathway for renewal at the local level. The PBI will be able to run this semesterly orientation and improve from within. This is of utmost importance that the people within the system have the power to make their own system better and create growth among the students as a byproduct of the system upgrades. This scenario will breed ownership and commitment to a common cause.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The potential influence for positive social change is significant at the family and college levels. The project will provide an opportunity for many families to become partners with the universities and learn about the college process and expectations for their children in ways that have never occurred. The project identifies families as invaluable members of the college community. The project calls for a redistribution of value to all students regardless of the amount of knowledge in which they possess when coming into college.

As this work elevates the vital importance of providing resources at the forefront of students' college career, it also raises the assessment of the college that is open to such endeavors for implementing that change in the system to better serve incoming first year

students. The project deliverable mobilizes the university to seek out others to bring to the table through honoring their unique contributions. The one size fits all mindset is erased in this model, and student engagement becomes tailored to the student's needs. Positive social change at both the family and college levels is attainable in small ways because the project creates value for each contribution and actively seeks such additions to the university as part of the mission to increase graduation rate for African American male students.

Conclusion

Increasing graduation rates for African American male students through student engagement is an effective, research-based intervention that colleges and universities can implement to support the growth and achievement of all students. Regardless of where a student derives from and what resources that student may have access to in their life. The simple act of providing the vital resources at the forefront of a student's college career can boost student success. There is a vast collection of literature and research that has been conducted to validate the critical importance of graduate African American male students in the community and society to contribute to positive social change.

The project study provided an important opportunity to gather data from an administrators and university leadership. The data collected will provide insights into the beliefs and college experiences of African American male students. A detailed analysis rendered a broad view of strengths and weaknesses within the PBI. Four themes emerged from the data including work study opportunities, support from community connections, engagement with diverse faculty and staff, and distraction of financial concerns. The

project deliverable was developed in alignment with the articulated themes. The result was the creation of a 3-day orientation that reinvents the student engagement aspect and shifts beyond the traditional orientation and allows a better more trustworthy connection between the university and incoming first year students.

As colleges and universities confront the massive influence of COVID-19 on education and higher learning, this work is more pertinent than ever. Colleges and universities are in the midst of recalibrating their practices and considering alternatives to increase the learning and reduce the loss that may have occurred because of this world pandemic. Students, staff, and faculty have been required to shift from a brick to mortar to distance learning while being asked to maintain the same level of engagement and commitment to the work.

Necessity has changed the landscape of higher education. It is incumbent on colleges and universities to use this national pandemic as a pathway forward wherein universities and incoming first year students work in tandem to meet the needs of all students to ensure degree completion. This pandemic has taken a great deal from us as a nation; however, it has also illuminated a more perfect option for students to become partners to a university rather than simply just attending said university.

This is the time for a call to action for colleges and universities to unite in the face of this crisis and rise as a reformed institution that distills the work of ages into a simple tenet. Student engagement is essential to the collective academic success of African American male students. It is an almost limitless resource that costs nothing and is readily available. As we go forward, it is time to consider restructuring how university

orientation use to operate to forge a new paradigm that can assist with student engagement and retention to increase the graduation rate of African American male students.

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Appendix A: The Project

Project Description

My study revealed various supports and barriers described by successful African American students for setting an academic agenda and goal setting to ensure students are involved in goal setting. For the student in my study the following themes were identified: (a) importance of work study opportunities, (b) support from community connections, (c) engagement with diverse faculty and staff, and (d) distraction of financial concerns. The insights have resulted in actions and activities for a 3-day professional development directed at three audiences.

The primary audience for the professional development opportunity is college officials (faculty, administration, and staff) and any stakeholder who is involved in first year orientation activities. Any campus employee could benefit from the professional development. Academic agenda and goal setting can and should occur across campus and in multiple settings. The project contains the professional development necessary to ensure all members of campus are focused on the orientation of First Year students and their families to support retention through graduation. Below is a description of how this orientation could be executed and what resources would need to be used to measure learning outcomes.

Days	Description of Day
<p data-bbox="363 285 430 317">Day 1</p> <p data-bbox="305 344 488 375">The WELCOME</p> <p data-bbox="321 405 472 436">(Length: 3hrs)</p>	<ul data-bbox="570 285 1421 1352" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="570 285 1421 772">• Ensuring belongingness on campus. Welcomeness has been tied to student persistence. When students can “see” themselves as part of the campus community, it creates the setting where academic agendas and goal setting become more common place and the essential elements of college life are all demystified for students. Building a shared vocabulary and empowering all members of the campus to participate in the welcoming of new students to campus involves a central concept. In my study, the deck of cards containing all the offices, school departments, and campus resources could help all students, faculty, and staff engage around the process of full orientation. The immersive experience invites the entire campus to play a role in helping students set an academic agenda with clearly stated goals for graduation. This kick off on day one consist of best practices for welcoming all First-Year students. All incoming students will have the opportunity to meet administrative staff, second year students, and faculty via a panel introduction. Panel will consist of (2 faculty, 2 staff, 2 current students). <li data-bbox="570 779 1421 1016">• All First-Year students will be given a deck of cards (See card description below). Students will be asked to familiarize themselves with the deck of card by getting into groups of 6-8 students (groups may increase up to 10 students depending on orientation size). Students will play the card game in 2-teams and acquire 2-points per correct answer. The team to reach 100 points first will win the game and will receive SWAG items from the university, the game should be played for a minimum of 45 minutes and a maximum of 75 minutes depending on size of orientation class. <li data-bbox="570 1022 1421 1352">• After the game is played, students will come together for the conclusion of the day. In their cohorts, students will have the opportunity to present a “carnation” to the individual who made them feel the most welcome on the first day. Prior to the closing remarks the winners of the game will be announced and presented with university embossed SWAG items. Pending budgetary considerations, closing remarks should be done by a guest speaker (Vice President of Student Affairs would be an ideal candidate for Day 1). End of the day will involve a picnic, live music, sponsored by student government with supplemental information about how students can get involved with clubs, support athletic teams, and get an on-campus work study job or internship.
<p data-bbox="363 1358 430 1390">Day 2</p> <p data-bbox="315 1419 479 1507">The SCAVENGER HUNT</p> <p data-bbox="321 1537 472 1568">(Length: 3hrs)</p>	<ul data-bbox="570 1358 1421 1843" style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="570 1358 1421 1724">• Day 2 will consist of a brief welcome to provide guidance on the goals and objectives of setting an academic agenda. To start, a student will describe how setting goals for academics improved his or her first year experience. The student cohorts will be cofacilitated by school officials. This day will have student cohort campus wide scavenger hunt. Students will be paired by program of study into groups of two. In the 90 minutes allotted, students will attempt to complete the “hunt” for each office on campus. Library, disability services, the bursar, financial aid, and the campus clinic will all be included. Individual dorms will also be included in the deck of cards that were used on Day-1. The campus card deck consists of vital information that pertains to the university and being a successful college student. <li data-bbox="570 1730 1421 1843">• With every stop on the scavenger hunt, students must interact with a faculty, and staff to collect a sticker. The pairs of first year students will use their deck of cards to find specific departments on the campus. Representatives from the Bursar’s Office, The Registrar’s Office, The

	<p>Office of Student with Disabilities, Academic departments will be prepared to ask the students one question: “How can I help you succeed this year?”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Scavenger hunt should last no longer than 90 minutes, regardless of orientation size. Once the 90 minutes are up, students are to return back to the main area where orientation is being held. Each location on the scavenger hunt will provide students a stamp or sticker to complete a campus gameboard. • Once all students return, they should be greeted with a Guest Speaker (in this case for Day-2 the Guest Speaker should be a notable alum). The speaker will speak on their first-year experiences, academic agenda creation, goal setting, and the supports that contributed to their success at the institution. • Lunch should be served, and orientation concluded.
<p>Day 3</p> <p>MEET THE Families</p> <p>(Length: 3hrs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Day 3 will acknowledge and celebrate family and community involvement. The focus will shift to the parents, guardians, community members, and school officials of the students. Day three will focus on how to help first year students by focusing on the community who helped get students to this point in their academic careers. • The families will be invited on campus for an opportunity to meet faculty, staff, and will be provided first year student led tours of the campus. • Upon arrival, community members and parents will be greeted and escorted to the area where orientation will be held, by student leaders. • Once parents arrive to the location, A welcome should occur by either the University president, and/or University provost and a selected student who can speak to the challenges ahead and how fostering a sense of community can help a student persist in his or her studies. • A panel of 2 faculty, 2 staff, and 1 current student will be made available after the welcome, for parents to learn more about the university. The panel should be moderated by the Orientation leader or the Vice president of student affairs. • After the panel discussion, parents, guardians, and families will be escorted in groups (between 6-10 groups-depending on orientation size), to be provided with a campus tour of the campus by first year students. Prior to the tour the parents, guardians, and families will be provided with their own set of cards to use as a guide as they are introduced to the different departments on their tours.

Card Game: A Survival Guide for First-Year Students

From the information that was gathered from the participants in my study, goal setting and having an academic agenda were essential elements for success. In the interviews that I conducted, the African American Male students described a strong value of family, peers, and interaction with faculty and staff. Successful students reported that

athletics was a vital source of motivation in their persistence to graduation. A majority of successful students lacked crucial knowledge of the institutional environment due to lack of information at orientation.

The gap in information about which department provided which services encouraged me to develop a card game, which will be served as a guide for First-Year students. The card game will provide questions about topics related to departments, faculty, staff, and student government. The game will be played in a format similar to taboo. It will consist of 2 teams with their respective deck of cards, one person will be holding the card and facing their teammates and will ask the question that is on the card, the participating teammates will then attempt to answer the question that is asked, within 60 seconds, the objective is to get as many cards answered as possible within that time. For every correct answer, the team will receive 2 points. The team to reach 100 points will win the game. Below is a sample of how the cards will look like. Colleges and Universities can customize the cards with their respect school colors and logo as they like.

What is the individual that oversees an academic department called?

A: Department Chair

[twinkl.com](https://www.twinkl.com)

Where do you go to pay your tuition?

A: The Bursar's Office

[twinkl.com](https://www.twinkl.com)

What is the Student Governing body called? and where can they be found?

A: Student Government Association (SGA), They are usually found in the Department of Student Life

[twinkl.com](https://www.twinkl.com)

How often should you contact your parents/guardians in your first year?

A: It is recommended that a first-year student should contact their parents/guardians at least 2x per week during their first semester (approximately 30 times)

[twinkl.com](https://www.twinkl.com)

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol:

Interview Script and Interview Questions

Greetings:

Hello, my name is Hamilton Raymond, and I am doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Leadership and Management program at Walden University. I'm here to learn about African American male students' persistence at a Predominantly Black Institution (PBI). Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. The purpose of this interview is to learn your perceptions and on campus experiences while attending a PBI. There are no right or wrong answers, or desirable or undesirable answers. I want you to be comfortable saying what you really think and feel. With your permission, I would like to audio record our conversation to avoid having to write down each thought you express so that I can pay attention to my conversation with you today. Everything you say will be confidential, and only me and my doctoral committee members will be aware of your answers. Your information will be masked by a participant number, and all research materials will be stored in a password protected environment.

RQ: How do African American male students who graduated from Predominantly Black Institutions describe their experiences with academic goal setting and a graduation agenda?

Research Question One: Interview Questions

1. Based on your experiences while in college, did the institution and the community have a critical impact in you persevering to graduation? Describe how you thought about graduation. Who did you talk to about graduating from college? Can you describe one of the conversations you had about graduation before it happened?
2. Overviews about perseverance can be misleading due to the distinctiveness of each institution. When you were first looking for an institution to attend, what aspect of a college or university stood out first to you most? Was it the institutional structures or the educational structure? How did that help you persist through graduation?
3. Did you have any pre-college factors, such goal setting, childhood upbringing, and societal norms that helped you persist to while in college? Did those pre-college factors influence you to become involved with Student Government, if so, where you involved with commencement or graduation, and if so, in what capacity?
4. The social shift for first-year students is crucial to their achievement. Describe the relationships you had with faculty and staff, and what role if any, did they play in your success during your first year? (Probing questions: Did you gravitate to an

- individual faculty and/or staff, if so, why them? Please provide an example a positive and a negative experience you had with faculty and/or staff? How did that experience influence your ability to persist?)
5. If you participated in work study, had a campus-based job, or a regular job, how did your employment impact your level of obligation to your personal objectives, such academic goal setting, grades, and graduation? Did you talk to other students or your campus supervisor about your academic work or your intent to graduate? Can you describe a conversation you had about school in your campus-based job? If you did not work on campus, you can discuss your off-campus employment here.
 6. While in college what kinds of academic goals did your professor provide, and where those goals in alignment with your institutional obligation? If you had conversations about academic goals or graduation, please describe one of those conversations. If no conversation with a faculty member occurred, did you set academic goals for yourself or with other people? (Probing question: How did these goal setting tactics motivate you as a student and allowed you to persist to graduation?)
 7. Please describe a time or action taken that helped you obtain a grade that you wanted in a particular course? (Probing questions: How did you take advantage of a study group? Have you ever have used on campus tutoring, or office hours with a faculty member, if you did, what was the conversation like?)
 8. How long did it take you to graduate? What contributed to your ability to graduate? Did you set a graduation term? Were you able to graduate in the term you indicated? Why or why not?
 9. Did you ever contemplate dropping out? If so, what was the reason for that thought due to institutional obligation? What actions did you or the school take to help you come to a conclusion about your academic goals?
 10. Did any specific class, curriculum, or academic staff member play a role in your persistence through college? How did that class, curriculum or academic staff strengthen your level of institutional commitment? Please describe the most important conversation that you had with another person that resulted in your desire to stay in school.

Thank you

Thank you so much for your time today, and that is all the questions that I have for you. Are there any final thoughts that you would like to share with me regarding African American male student persistence at a PBI? This has been very helpful to me in my study, and I will be sending you the transcript of our conversation by email within the next week. Thank you again for your time.