

Calling Out the Elephant: An Examination of African American Male Achievement in Community Colleges

Edward C. Bush*
Riverside City College

Lawson Bush, V
California State University, Los Angeles

This mixed method study examines the effects of community college institutional factors on the academic achievement of African American males and their perceptions of their college experience. We found that African American men in comparison to other ethnic and gender sub-groups (for both the California community college system and at Inland Community College) are disproportionately underachieving in all segments of the academic outcomes measured. African American men throughout California's community college system (including Inland Community College) are the lowest performing subgroup when one considers: percentage of degrees earned, persistence rates, and average cumulative grade point average. The analysis of African American men's perceptions of their college experience suggest that African American men have greater amounts of dissatisfaction and do not engage with the various segments of the college when compared to the other subgroups in the study. African American males were more likely not to meet with faculty members or have contact with them outside of the classroom. More importantly, faculty interaction predicted if African American male students persisted, transferred, and maintained a higher grade point average at the case study institution. The variables associated with campus climate predicted if African American male students transferred, had higher grade point averages, and graduated at higher rates from the case institution.

Despite the high number of African American students enrolled in two-year institutions (California Postsecondary Education Commission, 2006)¹, there is a pronounced scarcity of educational literature and research about the community college system in general and African American students specifically. Furthermore, if one examines the body of literature concerning African American men and the effects of community college education, the scarcity of literature becomes even more apparent (Hagedorn, Maxwell

¹ In looking at college attendance data as of fall 2006, 81 percent of all Black males in California public colleges and universities were enrolled in California community colleges in comparison to 70 percent of White males and 60 percent of Asian males. In addition, Black males attend community colleges in greater numbers than Black females, and their Asian and White male counterparts according to the California Postsecondary Education Commission 2006 report. As of fall 2006, there were a total of 58,486 Black males enrolled in California public institutions of higher education.

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Edward C. Bush, Vice President of Student Services, Riverside City College, 4800 Magnolia Ave, Riverside, CA 92506 Email: edward.bush@rcc.edu

Hampton, 2001; Hood, 1990). Nora and Cabrera (1996) opine that upon review of extensive research, there were no theoretically based studies focusing on African American male community college students. To this end, this current study examines the impact of institutional factors, such as faculty interaction, campus climate, and peer interaction on the academic achievement of African American male students attending California community colleges. This study highlights the institutional quandary that African American males face as they attempt to matriculate successfully through the California community college system by examining the institutional factors rather than by focusing on the students as the unit of analysis. Second, this study analyzes the achievement levels of African American males enrolled in California community colleges and at a selected community college. Third, this study looks at the perceptions that African American male students have of the level of institutional support, and the degree to which their perceptions affect academic performance. Finally, this study analyzes the relationship of the current levels of institutional support at the community college level and the academic achievement of African American males.

Literature Review

Educational scholars who have examined the factors that contribute to the academic success of African American males have focused on primarily two schools of thought. The first school of thought analyzes individual characteristics and the second focuses on pre-college indicators, known as cognitive and non-cognitive variables, respectively. Cognitive variables are factors such as high school grade point average, level of math completed, test scores, and placement scores. Non-cognitive variables are factors such as social interaction, motivation, and a student's self-concept (Brooks-Leonard, 1991). Johnson (1993), in his study of success factors for African American males at the University of South Carolina, defined cognitive variables, "as those variables that objectively measure intellectual ability and are exhibited by some numerical score, rank or range" (p. 31). Johnson defines non-cognitive variables "as affective, psychosocial constructs, subjective in nature that describe the feeling, perceptions, and/or attitudes" (p. 31).

Research suggests that indicators, such as high school grade point average, test scores, parental education level, and a positive self-efficacy, are correlated to the success of African American males in higher education. These scholars, as well as others that look at African American male achievement, have not adequately explored institutional characteristics as variables and limit their studies to the dichotomies between cognitive and non-cognitive variables (Grimes, 1997; Hagedorn, et al., 2001; Johnson, 1993).

Hagedorn, et al. (2001) collected data on 202 African American male students who enrolled in college in one of three terms, Fall 1995, Fall 1996, and Spring 1997 at a west coast community college. The study sought to answer the following question: What are the significant factors predicting retention among African American males in an urban community college? The methodology employed to answer this question was a quantitative approach using a logistic regression model and retention as the dependent variable and multiple independent variables. Hagedorn, et al. separated their independent variables into four blocks: (1) pre-college factors, consisting of parent education level and high school preparation, (2) ability testing, including students' self-assessment of their ability, (3) students' experience during the semester, consisting of average credit hours and attendance of students at pre-enrollment orientation, and (4) students' experience during the semester focusing on issues outside the purview of the college. Hagedorn,

et al. concluded that there were factors in each of the four blocks that correlated to African American male student retention and success. These factors were high school GPA, the number of course credit hours, and high school preparation.

Despite the findings in the previously mentioned study, several scholars maintain that cognitive and non-cognitive factors alone cannot determine academic performance. In fact, some scholars, such as Donovan (1984), Hood (1990), Lang (1992), and Nettles (1988), question the validity of studies that suggest that cognitive and non-cognitive factors can accurately predict the academic achievement of African American students. Lang (1992) in her study of barriers to Black educational achievement states the following:

Recent research shows it is clear that the higher attrition rates of Black students are largely attributable to their socioeconomic background and to the peculiar characteristics of higher education institutions. Yet, it has also become clear that when socioeconomic factors are controlled, the attrition rate of Blacks after enrolling in college is not strikingly different than that of Whites. This points directly to the increasing significance of institutional factors on the attrition of Black students after college enrollment (p. 513).

Carroll (1988), in her study of freshman retention and attrition factors of student success at Medgar Evers Community College, further support the idea that institutional factors play an emerging role in determining the success of African American students. Carroll noted that the predictive validity of cognitive and noncognitive characteristics, such as high school grade point average, and SAT scores, especially for African American students who are enrolled in community colleges cannot adequately predict success, and these factors must be integrated with institutional variables.

Carroll's study of Black students in an urban community college setting attempted to answer five questions.

(1) How do demographic characteristics (i.e., sex, age, home, language) relate to academic success and dropout behavior of Black freshmen in a college discovery program, as well as those not in a college discovery program, at an urban community college? (2) How are the pre-enrollment and individual characteristics related to academic success and dropout behavior of Black freshmen enrolled in the college discovery program and those not enrolled? (3) How is the participation in peer interaction activities by Black freshmen related to academic success and dropout behavior? (4) How are student-counselor interaction and student-faculty interactions related to the academic success and dropout behavior of Black freshmen? (5) How are sex, age, and educational goals of persisters and dropout students in college discovery and non-special programs related to peer interactions, student-counselor interactions, and student-faculty interactions? (p. 52).

Carroll (1988) found that "high school average does not consistently contribute the most to the prediction of academic success of educationally underprepared Black students in a predominantly Black urban community college ...institutional variables significantly contributes to prediction" (p. 58). Her study further concluded that there were three independent variables that emerged as having significant correlation with student outcomes. Two of the three variables were institutional variables, which consisted of perceived counselor effectiveness and student

availability (peer interaction). The third was a non-cognitive variable, which was highest expected degree.

Carroll's findings differ from those of other researchers who have analyzed predictors that lead to student achievement for African American students. Davis (1994), Johnson (1993), and Nettles (1998) have concluded that cognitive and non-cognitive variables, including grade point average, as being significant in predicting the achievement of African American male and female students. Carroll attributed the significant role of institutional variables and student achievement as represented in her findings to the fact that she studied African American students in community colleges and not African American students enrolled in four-year institutions. Carroll also attributed the difference of her findings to the way she approached her methodology. She explains this in the following manner:

The apparent discrepancy between this study's finding and related research may be explained by differences in the student populations sampled and the operational definitions and the selection of variables. Most research studies have used Black students' first semester college GPA as a dependent variable to measure academic success and failure in 4-year colleges. The difference in independent variables used (i.e., college GPA as opposed to the actual behavior of dropping out or transferring) may be a major cause of discrepancies in the findings. Further explanation of this study's results may lie in the sample studied. This study's sample was biased toward educationally underprepared Black students, and the lower predicative validity of high school average may be partially because of the narrow range of academic ability among these students at the time of admissions (p. 58).

Nettles's (1998) article, *Factors related to Black and White students' college performance*, questions if there were significant differences in the academic performance and experiences of African American and White college students. If so, what are those differences and what causes them? Nettles compared African American and White student performances based on what he considered the two most important indicators of college performance, the students' cumulative grade point average and progression rates. The methodology used in this study was a multiple regression analysis with grade point average and progression rate as dependent variables, and students and faculty characteristics as predictor variables, which consisted of both cognitive, non-cognitive variables, and a limited number of institutional factors. The following sample illustrates the variables Nettles analyzed to determine significance with grade point averages as factors and progression: study habits, high school grade point average, academic integration, SAT scores, student satisfaction, faculty contact with students, distance from home, financial need, and academic motivation.

Nettles's (1998) comparison of African American and White college students' performances found that African American students differ from White students in three critical areas. First, African American students have lower high school preparation in terms of GPA and test scores, which correlate with the lower overall grade point average in college. Second, African American students' attitudes and perceptions of institutional characteristics; third, was the extent to which students interacted with faculty members. Faculty interaction was identified as being distinctly different from White student experiences and was found to be more highly correlative to African American student outcomes than pre-college characteristics.

Institutional characteristics as pertinent factors leading to African American male achievement have further been supported by the studies analyzing the academic success rates of African American males enrolled in historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in comparison to their counterparts at predominately White postsecondary institutions (Nettles, 1988; Ross, 1998). Several studies (Allen, 1987; Allen & Jewell, 2002; Davis, 1994; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Ross, 1998) purport that African Americans in general and African American males in particular demonstrate greater success both academically and socially. Davis (1994) study revealed that African American male students who attend Black colleges have a greater perception that they are supported by the institution and have a higher sense of connectedness to the college, exemplified by their interaction with faculty, and the campus climate, student involvement, and positive peer interaction. On the other hand, African American male students on predominantly White campuses perceive that the institutional environment is adversarial, citing greater feelings of unfair treatment, a devaluing of their academic capabilities, and increasing discriminatory or racist practices. As a result, the implications of these perceived institutional characteristics have impacted the academic outcomes of African American males attending both HBCUs and predominantly White institutions (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson & Mugenda, 2001; Mallinckrodt, 1988).

Moreover, studies have also suggested that the embedded practices of predominantly White institutions rather consciously or unconsciously create an environment that is deleterious and is in contrast to African American student ethos. Thus these practices have led to the underachievement of African American students. Table 1 reveals how institutional characteristics can conflict with African American students’ needs (Nora & Cabrera, 1996)

Table 1
Factors that Contribute to the High Attrition Rate of African-American Students Attending Predominately White Institutions

Student Characteristics	Institutional Characteristics
Feeling alienated and isolated	Anglo-European teaching philosophy
Deficient academic preparation	Absence of minority role models
Language Barriers	Lack of faculty and peer involvement
Insufficient financial resource	Hostile and unfriendly campus environment
Low self-esteem/identity issues	Institutional abandonment
Lack of multicultural programs	Family concerns
Low expectations of minority students	Poor academic advising in high Racial discrimination (subtle and overt) school

Source: (Holmes et al., 2001)

Several researchers, Astin (1999), Cabrera et al., (1999), Credle and Dean, (1991), Endo (1982), Rowser, (1997), and Tinto (1987), maintain that student perceptions of institutional support can positively or negatively impact aspects of student achievement. Nora and Cabrera (1996), in their study of minority freshmen students attending a pre-dominantly White

postsecondary four-year institution, analyzed the effects of students' perception of prejudice and discrimination and their effect on nonwhite students' academic outcomes. The study examined the following statements: (a) assess the direct and indirect effects of perceptions of prejudice-discrimination on persistence decisions, educational aspirations, academic and intellectual development, academic performance in college, commitment to the institution, academic experience, and social integration, and (b) determine the extent to which the role of perceptions of prejudice-discrimination differs in the college process for students of color and Whites (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Nora and Cabrera (1996) posit that students of color were more likely to have perceptions of a discriminatory campus environment, believed that faculty and staff held racial bias, and were on average more likely to have negative in-class experiences than their White counterparts. Antithetically, they found that students' perceptions of racial discrimination did not have overwhelming effects on nonwhite students' persistence and academic performance. However, the student's increased perceptions of prejudice and discrimination accounted for some variance in their ability to become acclimated to college. Nora and Cabrera (1996) study found the following:

Support was found for the proposition that perceptions of prejudice and discrimination negatively affect the adjustment of the minority student to the two realms of the college while damaging the cognitive and affective outcomes associated with college. However, results also suggest that perceptions of prejudice and discrimination do not have the overwhelming effect they are presumed to exert on the college persistence process among minority students. Performance in college, encouragement from parents, positive experience with the academic and social realms of the institution, and other factors in the model are more influential among minorities regardless of the outcomes measures under consideration (p. 141).

The different perceptions held by African American males concerning pre-dominantly White postsecondary institutions and pre-dominantly Black postsecondary institutions may contribute to their success at HBCUs (Nettles, 1988; Ross, 1998; Townsend, 1994). Moreover, the analysis of African American men's performances at HBCUs further supports the notion of institutional characteristics and their effect on student outcomes and leads to further circumspection of the exclusive role cognitive and non-cognitive variables play in predicting the academic achievement of African American male students (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Cuyjet, 2006). Davis (1994) argues that the greater success of Historical Black Institutions in educating African American men particularly is a direct result of greater institutional support. This success is briefly demonstrated by the fact that HBCUs account for 8 out the top 10 producers of engineers and 42% of Blacks who earned doctorates (Dervarics, 2002).

Allen's (1987) study of Black students on Black and White campuses note that African American students attending HBCUs entered college with lower socioeconomic status; their parents had lower educational attainment, and had poorer pre-college achievement levels than African American students attending predominantly White colleges. Given the aforementioned data, the following question emerges: What is taking place in higher educational institutions to cause lower academic success for African American males from when they enter to the time in they leave?

The institutional success of HBCUs has an important implication for the California community college system, given that the California community college students enter these institutions with lower college preparedness in comparison to students entering four year institutions, speak to the possibility of the California community college's system developing systemic interventions that create an environment conducive to African American male achievement (Jalomo, 2000). The body of literature that analyzed institutional characteristics and their relevance for enhancing the success of African American males has focused on institutional factors, such as student-to-faculty interaction, mentorship, counselor support, peer interaction, and engagement in student activities. These institutional factors have emerged as a viable predictor of student success (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Brooks-Leonard, 1991; Cabrera, 1999; Dawson-Threat, 1997; Endo, 1982; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Harper & Wolley, 2002; Hood, 1990; LaVant et al., 1997; Pascarella, 1977; Pascarella, Seifert & Whitt, 2008; Ross, 1998; Spradley, 2001; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 2006-2007; Tinto & Teaching, 2008). Spradley (2001) summarizes the institutional needs of African American males:

Several interventions can help to increase adult African American male success. Peer interactions provide needed social integration into the academic experience. Facilitative learning environments with faculty who nurture accumulated learning, contribute to knowledge acquisition, and encourage the application of learning to improve social surroundings are also critical to success. Being aware of the distinctive extra-curricular experiences that enrich learning and provide application opportunities is important (p. 3).

Tinto (1975), Pascarella and Patrick (1977), Pascarella, Seifert and Whitt, 2008, Endo and Harpel (1982), and Astin (1997) point out that faculty interaction with students on both a formal and informal basis correlates with students' ability to persist through college. Astin (1997) concluded:

Frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with the College than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic. Students who interact frequently with faculty members are more likely than any other students to express satisfaction with all aspects of their institutional experience including student friendships, variety of courses, intellectual environment, and even the administration of the institution (p. 525).

Astin (1999) also emphasized the salient nature of student involvement in relation to other variables that were thought to be relevant in students' academic success in postsecondary institutions. Astin defined student involvement as the level of investment a particular student puts into the college measured by his study time, amount of time on campus, participation in student organizations, and frequency of their interaction with faculty members. He found that the greater the student connection, the greater likelihood of higher student learning and individual growth. He further stated that all institutional policies and practices, relating to non-academic as well as academic matters, can be evaluated in terms of the degree to which they increase or reduce student involvement.

What becomes problematic about Astin's observations on the importance of student involvement and interaction is that African American males--due to a lack of institutional

support--do not access the very services that the literature suggests are essential to college success. This lack of institutional support is illustrated in how African American males interact with their professor at significantly lower rates than their White counterparts. Davis (1994) attributes the cause for the lack of interaction by African American males based on their perceptions of low institutional support. Davis further contends that faculty must understand that African American men perceive the institutions as being nonsupportive and consequently doing little to nothing to engage faculty members in or outside of the classroom setting.

There are two points of view that addressed the issue about why African American male students have less interaction with faculty members. Davis (1994) and Dawson-Threat (1997) contend that the deficiency in the interaction between faculty and African American male students is unintentional and more of a problem of perception as opposed to deliberate institutional practices. Conversely, Mingle (1978) concluded that White faculty members deliberately interact less with Black students than with other students. Moreover, Mingle found that faculty believed that Black students should meet the same standards as other students, interprets this belief as faculty being unwilling to change their teaching styles or support the institutional changes necessary to support the needs of Black students.

Kobrak (1992) concluded that one of the ways to address the disconnection between African American students and faculty members at predominantly White institutions is to increase the number of Black faculty members at these institutions. Kobrak wrote that “the most important step is clearly to educate and hire more Black faculty members as rapidly as possible” (p. 527). Yet, he recognized that there is no single panacea for addressing this issue.

The negative perceptions of African American students did not only affect their interaction with faculty, but also impacted how they accessed services such as student organizations or utilized campus facilities. Cabrera (1999) reported that African Americans’ perceptions and encounters with a hostile campus climate substantially reduced their commitment to their particular institution (Cabrera, 1999). Lavant, Anderson and Tiggs (1997) state that, “. . . evidence shows that that when Black men have been given the opportunity to participate in higher education, and when well conceived and formalized support systems are put into place to promote achievement, Black men have been successful” (p. 1). Therefore, it is incumbent upon institutions, community colleges specifically, that seek to address the underachievement of African American males to create an environment that is supportive and understanding of the experience, culture, backgrounds, perceptions, gifts, talents, and resources of African American males and to develop institutional programs and policies that target the need of this population (Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Dawson-Threat, 1997; Hagedorn, et al, 2001; Hood, 1990; Johnson, 1993; LaVant, 1997; Pruitt, 1987; Roach, 2001; Ross, 1998; Strayhorn, 2008).

Background

The community college selected for this study is Inland Community College (ICC)² founded in 1916. The college is located in Southern California and is east of Los Angeles. The college serves a large portion of Inland County encompassing a population of over 1.4 million people. The college has approximately 334 full-time faculty, 1,171 adjunct faculty, 506 professional and support staff, and more than 34,042 students. Table 2 displays the Fall 2003 enrollment by ethnicity and the percentage of each ethnic group to the total population of

² Pseudonym
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students in the year the study was conducted. African Americans are the third largest racial group at ICC comprising over 11% percent of the total population. African American males account for approximately 5% of the total student enrollment.

Table 2
Fall 2003 Enrollment Headcount and Percentage by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Headcount	Percentage
Asian	1,509	4.4
*African American	3,960	11.5
Filipino	823	2.4
Hispanic	10,372	30.4
Native American	420	1.2
Other	1,156	3.3
Pacific Islander	189	.5
Unknown	775	2.2
Anglo	14,836	43.5

* African American males account for 1,625 (4.7%) of student enrollment.

Methods

We employed a quantitative analytical secondary analysis and a basic qualitative research model that utilized an element of case study research design for the current study. Borrowing from the tenets of case study research, the approach used sought to determine if there is a relationship between institutional factors in a specific unit or case, that is, a California community college and African American male achievement (Yin, 1993).

Research Questions

1. How are African American males performing in the California community colleges in comparison to other ethnic and gender sub-groups?
2. What perceptions do African American males have about institutional support at the community college level?
3. Do institutional factors correlate with African American male achievement?
4. What institutional and non-institutional variables best predict African American male achievement?

Hypotheses

1. African American male achievement in California community colleges is consistent with the trends of the underachievement of this population in other academic institutions.

African American males in comparison to other ethnic and gender sub-groups will exhibit disproportionately lower performances on academic outcome measures.

2. African American males will perceive that a supportive environment is lacking, which would include less faculty interaction, less commitment to the institution, and less involvement in campus activities than other racial and gender groups.

3. Institutional factors and support are positively correlated with African American male student achievement.

4. Institutional factors, such as faculty interaction, particularly informal faculty contact will best predict African American male achievement. In addition, the level of student involvement exhibited by African American males will have predictive validity in determining African American male student achievement.

Variables

The following is a list of dependent variables analyzed in this study:

Outcome Measures: Dependent Variables

- Graduation rates: The number of degrees and certificates (that is certificates for 18 or more course units) awarded.
- Transfer rates: The number of students transferring from the community college into four-year institutions of higher education.
- Persistence rates: The percentage of students who were enrolled in courses from one term to the next.
- Grade Point Average: The average cumulative grade point average of African-American men at the end of their last term enrolled.

Independent Variables

The independent variables selected for this study are based on the review of the literature regarding institutional factors and non-institutional factors that affect achievement of students in postsecondary education. The following is a list of independent variables analyzed in this study:

Institutional Variables

- Informal and Formal Faculty Interaction: The number and type of formal and/or informal contact students have with their professors and counselors;
- Campus Involvement: Student involvement in campus clubs, government, and co-curricular organizations;
- Campus Climate: The general perceptions held by students of the institution, including, but not limited to, support, equity, engagement, experiences opportunity and access to college resources;
- Peer Interaction: The type and quality of interaction a student has with peer groups.

Non-Institutional Variables

- Parents Education: The highest level of education obtained by students' parents;

- Academic Aspiration: The highest level of degree a student is planning on achieving, as well as the importance of obtaining a degree;
- Family Support: The amount of support demonstrated by family members that encourages the student to achieve in college;
- Study Habits: The amount of time a student spends a week studying or in the library.

Data Collection and Analysis

This mixed methods study used the Inland Community College District's student survey data set, as well as the district's records of students who participated in the survey. The survey data were collected in a six-year period prior to 2003. The use of the student survey and the subsequent cohort student data were advantageous to this study. Many of the outcome measures were based on long-term educational goals, and the cohort data allowed the study to track students over a six-year period, which took into account students who left and re-entered the college at a later date.

Before students began studies at Inland Community College, all first-time ICC students completed an application for admission containing questions about their academic goals, academic background, and a questionnaire, along with a series of assessment tests to determine appropriate placements in reading, English, and math courses. Responses to the students' entry questionnaire provided data regarding their initial goals and educational commitment.

Next, a stratified random sample of approximately 1,600 students was drawn from the first-time students with a declared long-term educational goal such as, transferring to a four-year institution, and obtaining a degree or certificate from ICC. The sample was stratified by ethnicity and gender. Approximately 200 students were drawn from four racial categories (African American, Asian, Caucasian, and Hispanic).

Last, students were interviewed to determine their reasons for staying or leaving ICC, their level of satisfaction with the educational services they received, and whether or not they considered their experience to be a success. Departing students were asked by institutional research staff whether or not they met their educational goal at ICC. All respondents were interviewed by telephone by Institutional Research Department staff members of Inland Community College. To enhance the response rate, there was no limit set on the number of times a respondent was contacted before counting him/her as a non-respondent. Interviewers were instructed to leave messages and reschedule times for interviews until the respondent refused to be interviewed or until the interviewing period ended. Exactly 742 students completed interviews, yielding a response rate of approximately 46%.

Quantitative Analysis. Descriptive, correlation, and multiple regression statistics were used in this research project. The advantage of using a variety of statistical methods was that they enabled the researchers to provide a preliminary background of the achievement of African American men. Secondly, correlations allowed the study to observe the relationship of institutional variables and academic outcomes. Finally, multiple regression allowed for an analysis of the extent to which institutional and non-institutional variables can predict the community college achievement of African American males. The regression model used in the study was a stepwise regression model.

Qualitative Analysis. A focus group was used as a means of supporting and clarifying the quantitative data on African American male students' perceptions of their college experience and

its effects on their achievement. The focus group comprised of six African American male students enrolled at ICC. Participants had an age range of 18-25. Focus groups members were not participants in the student survey because the survey was conducted prior to their arrival.

The lead researcher, who served as the facilitator, asked the focus group a set of open-ended questions that was modified from a sample of the questions presented in the ICC cohort survey. The questions selected for the interviews centered on the independent variables used in the quantitative data analyses, faculty interaction, campus involvement, campus climate, and peer interaction. The regression model sought to test the predictive validity of institutional variables and African American male achievement by not only looking at institutional factors, but by also including non-institutional factors consisting of pre-college and individual factors. The variables contained in the survey were identified by the researcher as being either institutional or pre-college and individual variables (non-institutional variables). The items were placed in these two categories based on the definition of these variables provided in this study.

The focus group was conducted in a conversational interview pattern, which allowed for the participants to interact freely with one another, prompting a natural interaction. This format was used as a mechanism, which enabled each participant to build upon his collective experiences while creating an open sharing environment (Gall & Borg, 1996; Judd, Smith, & Kidder, 1991). This type of interviewing technique was used by the facilitator to pose questions that prompted natural interaction between focus group participants (Gall & Borg, 1996; Judd et al., 1991). The participants were selected from the general student body of African American male students enrolled at ICC in 2003. Fliers were posted on designated college posting areas soliciting participant involvement in the research project. Twelve potential students signed up to participate. A random sample of the 12 students was conducted to determine who would participate in the focus group. The focus group session was held in the conference room in the Student Activities Center located on the Moreno Valley campus of ICC and lasted for an hour and a half. The focus group was tape-recorded and transcribed. Subsequently, the transcription was analyzed, and the findings were reported based on the dialogue and themes that emerged from the discussion.

Findings and Discussion

Research Question 1

How are African American males performing in the California community colleges in comparison to other ethnic and gender sub-groups?

Hypothesis 1

According to data from the Inland Community College's Institutional Research Department and the California Community College Chancellor's Office, African American male achievement in California community colleges is consistent with the trends of underachievement of this population in other academic institutions. African American males in comparison to other ethnic and gender sub-groups will exhibit disproportionately low performances on academic outcome measures.

The data regarding the achievement levels of African American men at Inland Community College and the California community college system indicate that this population has the lowest rate of success in comparison to all other ethnic and gender sub-groups enrolled in

the California community college system. African American males are the lowest achieving group on three of the four outcome measures, which included: a) degree attainment- Asian women (19%) had the greatest probability of entering the institution and completing their long-term educational goals. In fact, they are more than twice as likely to graduate or receive a certificate as the lowest achieving sub-group, African American men (8%). African American males enrolled at ICC had a higher graduation rate in comparison to the aggregate percentage rate for African American males in the state system by one percentage point. As was the case for ICC African American males comprised the lowest achieving group for the state system in terms of a long-term goal completion rate; b) cumulative grade-point average - the mean grade point average for African American males is a mere 1.64, which represents a “D” average. African American men have the lowest average GPA of any of the sub-groups. The highest performing sub-group is Asian women (2.41). The GPA for African American men in the state system is a 2.14, which is a higher grade point average than for African American men enrolled at ICC. Although African American men for the state had a higher cumulative grade point average, they still accounted for the lowest overall GPA of any ethnic, racial, or gender grouping and; c) persistence rates California community college. Twenty-five percent of the incoming African American male students who entered the institution at the start of cohort did not persist beyond their first semester of college. Two years later, 56% of the African American male population is no longer enrolled at ICC. African American women, who persist at a slightly higher rate than their male counterparts, have a persistence rate of 67% at the end of the first term and 50% at the end of two-years. In comparison, Asian men and women, who have the highest persistence rate with 85% of the enrollees being retained after the first semester and 59% at the end of two years, have a 15% higher rate of retention than African American males. Similarities exist between the persistence rate of African American men enrolled in the California community college system and those at ICC. The aggregate state data reveal that African American men persist at a 2% higher rate than African American men at ICC. Seventy-six percent of African American men in the state who enrolled as first-time freshmen are retained after the first semester in comparison to seventy-four of African American males enrolled at ICC.

Transfer rates are the only outcome measure in which African American males are not the lowest achieving sub-group. However, African American males still trail well behind Asian and Anglo sub-groups in transfer rates. For example, African-American males had essentially the same transfer rate as Hispanic men (11.83%), but a significantly higher percentage total than Hispanic women (7.71%) and African American women (7.83%). Transfer rates were also the only measure which revealed that African American men had a higher achievement level than their female counterparts. The transfer pattern for African American men in the state system is consistent with the outcomes for the case institution. The state’s transfer rate of 11.47% for African American men is the same percentage rate for African American men at ICC.

These findings support the hypothesis predicted by the researchers: African American men are underachieving at the community college level. This finding follows the current trends regarding research on the achievement gap in primary and secondary academic institutions for African American males.

Discussion on Underachievement

The fact that African American men are under-achieving and lag behind their counterparts in the community college system probably comes as no surprise to anyone who has

even casually perused information regarding African Americans in postsecondary education. However, the underachievement of African American men in California's community colleges does not only affect the community college system. The educational underachievement impacts the social positioning of African American men in a larger societal context as degree attainment is directly attributed to one's income, social mobility, decreased likelihood of incarceration, and even increased life expectancy.

With this in mind, juxtapose the relationship between degree attainment and social and economic outcomes with the current state of affairs for African American men in the United States that caused some to label African American males as an endangered species (Bush, 1999; Gibbs, 1984, 1988). While considering the aforementioned, also reconsider that 81% of all African American men enrolled in college in the state of California attend a community college. Consequently, given that academic outcomes are equated with economic and social mobility then, the academic success of African American men in California community colleges creates little cause for optimism.

Research Question 2

What perceptions do African American males have about institutional support at the community college level?

Hypothesis 2

African American males will have perceptions of a lack of a supportive environment, less faculty interaction, less commitment to the institution, and an unlikelihood of being involved in campus activities than other racial and gender counterparts. The findings of this study support the above hypothesis. The perceptions of African American men were generated from responses gathered on the cohort survey. African American men expressed perceptions of the institution which suggest that they share some similar perceptions as their counterparts from other sub-groups. However, African American men expressed a greater dissatisfaction and lack of engagement with the various segments of the college than any of the other sub-groups examined in the study. African American males are less likely to meet with faculty members or have contact with them outside of the classroom. In fact, African American men more frequently than any other group expressed that they were often bored in class and were less likely to participate in campus activities, more likely not to participate in the campus orientation process, and had not encountered peers in college that can help them adjust to college.

Discussion of a Perceived Lack of Institutional Support

Institutional stakeholders may argue and may truly believe that they treat all students the same. By doing so there is little credence to the perceptions held by African American men. Then, naturally, the blame of the negative perception no longer becomes an institutional issue but a problem with the perceiver and not the perceived. Institutional stakeholders, unconsciously or consciously, are creating a community environment through their embedded practices that are in conflict with the ethos of African American male students. It is not a coincidence that this present study and others found that African American males have a higher probability of having a negative institutional perception than other groups. The problem may lay in the fact that

institutions believe or have a philosophical stance that they treat all students the same. African American males bring a set of experiences and knowledge that makes them different from anyone else. The same holds true for other groups as well. However, the findings are that no other group is having as difficult of a time engaging and accessing the institution as African American males.

Nora and Cabrera (1999) posit that students of color are more likely to have perceptions of a discriminatory campus environment, believe that faculty and staff hold racial biases, and are on average more likely to have negative in-class experiences than their White counterparts. The result of this current study regarding the perceptions of African American men about their institutions is consistent with the findings of Nora and Cabrera. The implication of these perceptions is that African American males will be less engaged in their college. This idea poses a quandary for institutions in that the group of students who are most in need of services and college intervention are the ones who are less likely to access these services. The direct implication of this negative perception of the institution by African American males to the findings of this study is that these perceptions affect how African American males interact with faculty members.

Davis (1994) contends that faculty must understand that African American men perceive the institutions as being non-supportive and, consequently, do not seek to engage faculty members in or outside of the classroom setting. Conversely, faculty members believe that African American male students' perceptions are the same as students from other sub-groups that the institution is supportive. Yet faculty does not initiate the type of interaction that will be beneficial in improving their students' academic performance.

Research Question 3

Do institutional factors correlate with African American male achievement?

Hypothesis 3

Institutional factors and support are correlates to African American male student achievement. The relationship of African American male contacts with faculty members is significant for transfer rates and persistence rates. However, the variable that strongly emerged is African American male interaction with peers. Peer interaction has a significant relationship with three of the four outcome measures. Peer interaction has a significant relationship in determining grade point average, transfer, and degree/certificate attainment.

The researchers did not anticipate the role that peer interaction would have on the academic outcome measures of African American males. One may inquire why peer interaction is considered an institutional characteristic. The role of peer interaction and the success of African American men are significant because this interaction forms the students' academic culture and institutional perceptions. It is important to note that, while four variables were identified and separated out as distinct institutional variables, no one variable exists in a vacuum. In other words, all institutional variables interact with each other interdependently to form a systemic institutional culture. Peer interaction in some ways encapsulates a variety of institutional characteristics. For example, the variables, student involvement and campus climate, do not have a correlation with any of the outcome measures. However, African American males' perceptions of these institutional functions contribute to the understanding of how peer

interaction is an institutional characteristic and provides avenues in which colleges can address fostering better peer interaction.

The focus group participants provide a powerful insight on how peer interaction of African American men is symptomatic of their disconnection from the college. The participants consistently described interaction with their peers, primarily other African American men, as having a negative impact on their ability to succeed academically. Peer interaction with African American men is perceived as something that African American male students had to overcome to be successful as opposed to a tool for success. The focus group participants continued to perceive that African American men were disinterested in anything relevant to the academic or social culture of the college and described African American males as men “hanging out” and discussing issues inconsequential to school. They provided a view of a group of students who did not have any real connection or engagement with the college. The focus group participants suggested that the institution needed to create mechanisms by which African American men could have positive interactions with one another.

Recommendations included adopting campus programming, clubs, mentorship, and support groups that were culturally and politically relevant to the unique challenges and issues faced by African American men. The overall institutional neglect in these essential areas has led to the creation of a counter-cultural academic sub-group at many institutions of higher education. Other research that sought to understand institutional factors that led to the success of African American males in community colleges also supported the importance of peer interaction.

Carroll’s (1988) study of African American students at Medgar Evers Community College highlights the importance of peer interaction for African American students. Carroll concluded that there were three independent variables that emerged as having a predictive relationship to students’ outcomes. Two of the three variables were institutional variables, which were comprised of perceived counselor effectiveness and student availability (peer interaction). The third was a non-cognitive variable, which was the highest expected degree. These findings are critical because Carroll’s study is one of the few analyses that highlights the role of institutional factors as predictors of academic success.

Discussion of Institutional Characteristics and African American Male Achievement.

Educational scholars who have sought to understand what factors contribute to the academic success of African American males have attempted to approach correlations to African American male student achievement in postsecondary education by analyzing non-institutional factors, consisting of individual characteristics and pre-college indicators. These factors are comprised of high school grade point average, parents’ education level, social interaction, motivation, study habits and a student’s self-concept (Brooks-Leonard, 1991). Despite the findings, there are several scholars and studies that maintain that non-institutional factors alone cannot determine academic performance (Hood, 1990; Lang, 1992; Nettles, 1988).

The research findings presented in this study on the relationship of institutional variables and African American, male student achievement lend further support to the emerging research that institutional factors play a prominent role in the academic success of African American males. The implications of this evidence suggest that if colleges want to impact significantly the success rates of this population, they must create and foster an institutional environment that is conducive to the success of African American males. This study does not attempt to refute the literature and research which conclude that individual characteristics and pre-college indicators

are factors that contribute to the success of African American students. However, the findings of this study underscore the idea that, when evaluating the success factors of this population, it is incumbent for institutions to know they are empowered to make a positive or negative influence on African American, male student achievement.

Research Question 4

What institutional and non-institutional variables best predict African American male achievement?

Hypotheses 4

Institutional factors, specifically faculty interaction and student involvement, will have predictive validity in determining African American male student achievement. In examining the relationship between institutional variables and the achievement rates of African American men, faculty interaction and campus climate emerged as having the strongest predictive relationship with the most outcome measures than the other variables examined. Faculty interaction significantly predicts the retention rates of African American students, indicates the likelihood of transfer, and points to a higher grade point average at the case institution. While campus climate significantly predicted if African American male students transferred, had higher grade point averages, and better graduation rates from the case institution. Peer interaction predicted the transfer rate of African American males. In addition, two non-institutional factors were predictors of two outcome measures. Parents' education was a predictor of grade point average and degree aspiration was a predictor of persistence rates. However, student involvement does not significantly predict any of the outcome measures for the achievement of African American male students.

Discussion of Predictive Relationships

The implications of campus climate and faculty interaction as predictors of academic success are also significant because of the prevailing idea of the importance of cognitive and non-cognitive variables in determining the achievement of African American male students. Studies that primarily examine the success factors of African American men in four-year institutions assert that socio-economics and high school GPA are the best predictors of achievement for African American male students. The research by Carroll and others, including this present study that examine institutional success factors at community colleges contribute to the creation of a theory about factors that facilitate the success of African American males in the community college system.

The results of this study clearly demonstrate the significant role institutional factors play in predicting the achievement outcomes of African American males. The multiple regressions in this study analyzing both institutional and non-institutional factors allow this study to compare directly the predictive validity of each achievement theory. Although, this study was unable to measure the significance of all non-institutional factors particularly many cognitive variables, such as high school grade point average, this study was able to examine many non-institutional variables often considered to play a prominent if not dominate role in predicting African American male academic achievement. The fact that institutional variables in comparison to

non-institutional variables emerged as being the best predictors of the achievement of African American males is significant to scholars and college practitioners who seek to develop intervention programs and services that address the achievement gap of African American males enrolled in postsecondary institutions.

The hypothesis was supported by the findings in that institutional variables predict African American, male achievement, particularly faculty interaction. However, the hypothesis assertion that student involvement in campus activities predicted academic success was not supported. In addition, the hypothesis did not consider that prominence of campus climate and the predictive relationship it had with African American male achievement at the case institution. Moreover, the hypothesis did not consider the role non-institutional factors played in the prediction of the achievement level of African American males.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of African American males enrolled in community colleges becomes paramount in the research, programs, and policies that seek to improve the conditions of African Americans in these institutions. Given the disproportionate number of African American males attending two-year institutions, the community college emerges as the postsecondary river African Americans male students must navigate through in order to succeed in higher education. The problem that arises from this current condition is that for many African American males the river is perceived to be infested with more mines than bridges.

There are intrinsic institutional problems facing community colleges. This coupled with the educational and societal factors affecting African American males creates a daunting task for concerned scholars and institutional stakeholders who attempt to improve the academic achievement of African American males attending community colleges. Considering these factors, one must pose the question, “Why have there not been more research, resources, and time devoted to the study of African American males in this context?”

The issue of African American male achievement becomes additionally complex and convoluted in regards to African American male students’ perception of their institutional support. The ramifications of the lack of support is that African American male students are not engaged nor are they encouraged to access college services that have proven to be advantageous to student achievement in four-year and two-year colleges.

Moreover, the role of institutional characteristics as a means of maximizing academic potential for African American males emerges from this current study as a viable and critical component. The role of the institution must be taken into consideration by colleges that are attempting to improve student achievement (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2006-2007). The role of institutional characteristics is heightened in the community college context as a result of their mission of open enrollment, which does not exclude on the basis of high school preparation or test scores, as their four-year counterparts. Consequently, two-year institutions are challenged to develop practices that will best assist students to reach their academic goals despite their demographic or educational background. The approach of analyzing student success from an institutional perspective, rather than from a cognitive or non-cognitive approach, takes most of the responsibility for African American male student underachievement away from the student unto the institution. Both in practice and in the body of the literature the institution as a focus is likened to the elephant in the room that no one desires to engage. However, the current study points to and *calls out the Elephant*.

The two-year college represents the first experience with postsecondary education and is often African American male students' last option for obtaining a degree beyond a high school diploma. More than 81% of all African American males attending college in California are enrolled in community colleges. Logic would dictate that if institutions are to impact positively the academic success rates of African American male students, then the community college materializes as the most expedient and the best positioned educational institution to address the plight of African American male students towards achievement in higher education.

The following is a list of proposed recommendations for community colleges policy and decision makers on practices that would lead to the greater success of African American men.

- (1) Develop programs that directly target African American male students.
- (2) Establish formal mentorship programs between faculty members and African American males.
- (3) Develop an orientation program designed to target the needs and concerns of African American males.
- (4) Employ African American faculty, counselors, and staff or others who are interested in the success of African American male students.
- (5) Establish African American male learning communities and cohorts.
- (6) Encourage faculty members to include in their coursework the significant contributions made by Africans to humanity in all areas of academic disciplines.
- (7) Create campus activities that engage African American males in the school culture.
- (8) Institutionalize a peer program pairing African American male second and third year students with incoming first-time freshmen.

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